Toaru Majutsu no Index 3

"Such misfortune..."

It's evening in the middle of summer. Kamijou Touma spoke when the juice vending machine ate up his money as he was returning from supplementary lessones.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

As the screech of loafers rang out, Misaka Mikoto called out to Touma.

"Onee-sama?"

Thenafter, the splitting image of Mikoto, her little sister, had turned up.

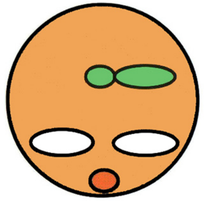
The three people encountered each other.

That was when the incident began.

The dramatic massacre, started by a Level 5 called Accelerator, has begun...

か-12-3
とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)③
鎌池和馬
電撃文庫
¥
550

9784840227858
1920193005509
ISBN4-8402-2785-3
C0193 ¥550E
MediaWorks
Published by MediaWorks
Recommended Retail Price: 550 JPY
*Consumption levy would be added to the price separately



Kamachi Kazuma

Please try to strip off the front cover of this book. The summary is written there. At most, just fold it back, but, do observe the bottom right corner (for new books, it may be obscured by a sash). For some reason, there is a cutting line surrounding the Dengeki Bunko logo, but, what in the world is this?

(Products of Dengeki Bunko)

Toaru Majutsu no Index

Toaru Majutsu no Index 2

Toaru Majutsu no Index 3

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Born in 1973. Self-proclaimed "Big movie fan" amongst others, but, remarkably, in recent days, has been visiting the theatre less often. Gingerly hoping to be supplied with a big screen for movies.

カバー／あかつきBP

とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス) 3

鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ

"Chaser!"
Student of Tokiwadai Middle School in Academy City — Misaka Mikoto
"...!!"
High school student of Academy City — Kamijou Touma

"...!"
"...What is it? says Misaka as she makes a query."
Mikoto's little sister — Misaka

"Hah-hah! Why ya runnin' away? You tryin' to secude me by shakin' your ass all happy like that!?"
Academy City's Level 5 — Accelerator

"The burns on the yakiniku. They're actually carcinogens."
Freeloading shrine maiden — Himegami Aisa
"T-Touma never came back, so I thought I was gonna starve to death!"
Nun managing the Index of Prohibited Books — Index
"I'm going to turn on the hot plate, okay?"
Kamijou Touma's homeroom teacher — Tsukuyumi Komoe

"I'm telling you to fight me, damn it——!!"
"I won't fight."

"Kh-hah, how interesting.
What the hell is that right hand!?"
"Damn it...!"

contents

10 Prologue **Radio Noise** Level2

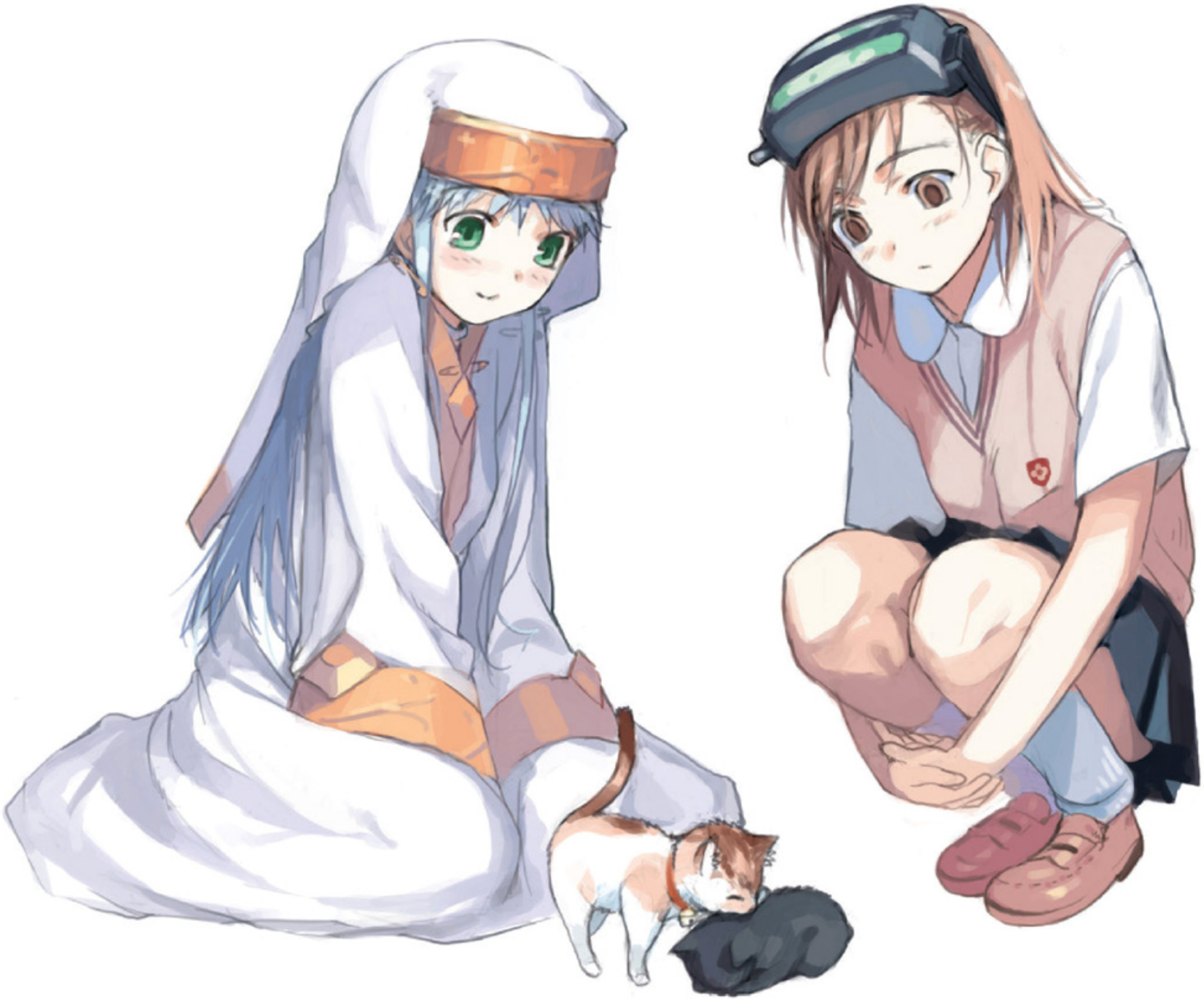
16 Chapter 1 **Imagine Breaker** Level0(and_More)

62 Chapter 2 **Radio Noise** Level2(Product_Model)

168 Chapter 3 **Railgun** Level5

214 Chapter 4 **Accelerator** Level5(Extend)

294 Epilogue **Only One** ID_NoT_Found



Toaru Majutsu no Index

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

3

Kamachi Kazuma

鎌池和馬

イラスト・灰村キヨタカ

Haimura Kiyotaka

デザイン・渡邊宏一

Translators

Js06 - Ch.2-4, Epilogue, Afterword

Yen Press - Prologue, Ch.1

PROLOGUE

Radio Noise.

Level2.

The wind was strong.

Dusk had set in. A lone girl, sprawled flat on the roof of a building to conceal her body, squinted slightly.

She held a rifle that was ridiculously large for her body size. With a length of 184 centimeters, it easily surpassed her height.

The Metal Eater MX.

It was derived from the Barrett M82A1 anti-tank rifle, which was legendary for having blown up a tank from two thousand meters away during the Gulf War. The production models lacked fully automatic firing because of its excessively powerful recoil, but the gun she held was a prototype model which retained the rapid-fire mode.

Though it was a brutal rifle which could smash a cheaper helmet into pieces with just the recoil, the slender girl somehow seemed accustomed to using it. For someone like her, the recoil couldn't possibly be forcibly suppressed, so the kickback has to be skillfully diverted into the ground. But instead of years of practice, the girl had merely fourteen days of data input via the training equipment known as Testament. After finishing, she learned the Metal Eater's recoil strength and derived the calculation needed to compensate for the recoil with optimum efficiency.

After silencing her breath, the girl gazed through her cold scope at the "target" six hundred meters away.

Insects gathered beneath a convenience store light as a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boy walked out onto the street. His body was thin and wiry, and his hair was as white as the girl's delicate skin. He looked as if he would snap if one merely grabbed him.

However, he would be better described as the sharp point of a knife. Every single one of the boy's official battles saved in the database were victories. Moreover, he had never been hurt, never had to defend himself, and never evaded an attack—not even once. The

boy was like a thin and fragile, but highly polished sword designed solely for offense without considering defense.

Although the girl didn't know her target's true name, his code name was Accelerator.

Within Academy City, there were no more than seven people ranked Level 5, but even within that list, the boy's name stood at the very top.

"(The crosswinds are strong... Correcting alignment three clicks to the left,)" the girl muttered under her breath while she turned a screw on the side of the gun's scope.

The girl's target was that boy who was on his way back home, swinging his convenience store bag as if bored.

The girl definitely would not be able to win by opposing him from the front—nobody could possibly defeat Accelerator without some underhanded method.

Nonetheless, since she couldn't win head-on, she wouldn't attack head-on.

For an esper, using their ability was no different from moving their limbs. Other than Level 0s, who lack any significant power, the involvement of esper powers could be roughly classified into two categories.

One was "active", when the ability user himself controlled the use of his powers.

The other was "passive", which activated reflexively when the ability user sensed danger.

Thus, if a surprise attack could hit before the opponent noticed that he was in danger, any sort of ability user could be defeated.

Academy City's Judgment had once implemented this tactic by shooting rubber bullets from a distance in order to stop rampaging ability users. However, their rubber bullets only cut consciousness. This girl was ending a life with steel-piercing ones.

"(Wind eddies... vortices from three directions. Correcting alignment one click to the right,)" the girl muttered quietly while she fine-tuned the scope even more.

Without corrections, the lead bullets would drift off target in unexpected winds. Furthermore, the city was flooded with buildings, so the wind wouldn't necessarily blow in one direction. Eddies of wind, flowing from various directions, collided together, forming vortices, and dispersed in all directions.

Missing was not an option. Her opponent was the strongest Level 5; if her first attack missed and was detected, then at that point in time the girl's defeat would become certain, no matter how much distance separated her and her target and no matter how far she fled.

The girl raised her finger to the trigger.

There was no hesitation. Even though the boy in front of the scope was a living human, if the trigger was pulled, the .50 caliber anti-tank bullets of this gun would rip through the sky at 3,070 km/hr. Even though the girl knew that the boy's upper body would transform into pieces of flesh faster than sound itself, there was not a hint of hesitation on her face.

Imposed upon those slender shoulders was one task:

Destroy the strongest Level 5 esper, Accelerator, with long-distance shooting.

"..."

The girl's ears were listening to the sounds of the wind. The flow of the winds that swirled into vortexes and collided together moved in a fixed direction for just a moment. It lasted for a little less than two seconds, but the complex eddies of wind were stable for that one moment.

She pulled the trigger.

A thunderous roar, like that of a fireworks factory exploding, ripped through the sky. Ignoring that she was sniping, the girl continued to fire on full-auto. She tenaciously absorbed the recoil that could topple even large adults over; within a second, twelve shots were fired with consistent pinpoint accuracy.

The girl ignored the now-empty magazine that emptied observed the fate of the boy through the scope. Since the flow of the winds was stable, there was no way the bullets could miss. All twelve bullets fired should have entered the boy's back; that slender, wire-like body should have burst into tiny chunks and scattered.

That should have been the case.

The next instant, the Metal Eater in the girl's hands exploded.

All of the shells that made a direct hit rebounded back. Almost like a video rewinding, the shells had their ballistics reversed, cleanly plunging back into the muzzle of the anti-tank rifle like a Kendama game, and the Metal Eater burst into tiny fragments.

The girl did not have the ability to visually detect the incoming flying bullets. All she knew was that the anti-tank rifle had been destroyed by some sort of force, her body was pierced by the countless resulting metal fragments, and her right shoulder, which she had pressed against the Metal Eater's stock, was severed by something passing through it.

Yet Accelerator, after taking the Metal Eater's shots, was unharmed.

In the end, the long-range shooting was a failure, an Accelerator was now aware of her presence.

That alone was enough for the girl to make a decision. The girl ignored the pain that felt like boiling water being poured over her head and fled towards the building's emergency stairs with her tattered body.

Now that her sharpshooting had failed, her one-in-a-million chance to win vanished. Therefore, she was not fleeing in defeat in order to regroup. Her flight was nothing more than her survival instincts trying to prolong her remaining life by a second or just a moment.

No footsteps reverberated in the dusk. The hunter closed the distance between him and the dying girl in total silence.

The hunter against the hunted. Their roles were reversed in a blink of an eye, and thus the curtains opened on a murder drama.

CHAPTER 1

Imagine Breaker.

Level0(and_More).

Part 1

August 20, 6:10 PM.

In the glow of this midsummer evening, Kamijou Touma walked home from his remedial classes, alone and exhausted. Even though there was a reason for it, he still found that going back to school for remedial classes during summer vacation was threatening his sanity.

Since those so-called “summer classes” usually started on the very first day of summer vacation, Kamijou probably was supposed to go to those classes from July 19th to July 28th as well.

Or at least, that was only the most likely case. Kamijou had no memories of events prior to July 28th, so he felt like he was being punished for lessons that he did not skip himself.

Anyway, for some reason...

Kamijou was standing there looking dumbfounded at the juice vending machine sitting in the road by itself.

(No way, come on, please.)

He didn’t want to give up on it so soon. Kamijou Touma had definitely slid a tow thousand yen bill into the machine. So then why was the vending machine not showing any sign of reacting? Well, he was well aware that two thousand yen bills were unusual in this day and age. But it was still his hard-earned two thousand yen. The machine hadn’t even given a peep after swallowing up such a large sum.

(What’s up with this vending machine? Is some mechanical empire rising up in rebellion or what!?)

Kamijou yelled at himself, frenetically trying the change return lever over and over.

(Such misfortune!)

Sadly, if he took out his frustration and started to shake or kick the machine, an alarm would sound. He had enough foresight to know that.

The undeveloped areas in the western parts of Tokyo had been cleared away all at once to build Academy City, but despite its rejection of all things occult, everyone who bore witness to Kamijou thought the same unscientific thing: “I guess there really is such a thing as misfortune”. He was just that unfortunate.

As he hung his shoulders in disappointment, he heard the sound of loafers clapping along the ground behind him.

“Excuse me! Would you quit spacing out in front of that vending machine? If you’re not getting anything, then move it, will you? I’m gonna faint from dehydration if I don’t drink something as soon as possible.”

Just as Kamijou heard the sudden voice from behind him, he was gently pushed aside by a girl’s soft hand on his arm. Imperfect though he may have been, he was still a boy in his youth. He would have normally expected his heart to start beating a little faster. Right now, though, the only thing on his mind was this unbearable, intimate heat clinging persistently to him.

(What, what?)

Kamijou twisted his neck, and he saw a girl who looked like she was in middle school. She had brown shoulder-length hair and a “default” face good enough not to need makeup. She wore a summer sweater over her white short-sleeved blouse. That, along with her gray pleated skirt made him guess that it was the famous Tokiwadai Middle School uniform. However, he couldn’t help but hesitate to call this girl “high-class”. She was making the kind of face a salaryman might make after the first time he was disturbed by a packed train, alighting onto the station platform, sick and tired of the whole thing. Maybe the summer heat was getting to her.

(...Who is this person?)

Did he know her, or was she a complete stranger just being overly familiar? As he had memory loss, he was worried by this. The most annoying part of having no memories was finding the line between total newcomers and acquaintances. He didn’t know how far into this he wanted to go.

Kamijou’s gut was saying that he knew her. However, he got the feeling that it would be okay if he was to say something mistaken to someone this comfortable around strangers.

(Ehh, let’s just get this over with...)

“...So. Whaddaya want, girl?”

“You know, I have a name! It’s Misaka Mikoto! I can’t believe you still don’t remember it, you total moron!!”

The instant the girl shouted, she unleashed a pale blue spark from her light-brown bangs.

(Damn, do jokes not work on her!?)

Without thinking about it, he assumed a defensive posture, and at that moment, a spear of blue-white lightning extended from her forehead like a horn and shot forth at light speed, with him in his sights.

If he had watched it and tried to react, he never would have made it in time. However, his body moved on reflex before the bolt launched. It was almost like it remembered the habit because he’d been on the receiving end of this attack many, many times before.

Kamijou swept his right hand sideways to backhand it, like he was swatting away a passing fly.

Just like that, the javelin of high-tension current that approached one billion volts split apart like a pillar of water, then disappeared.

Imagine Breaker.

It didn’t matter if it was a supernatural ability or magic. It was his unique talent. If something was caused by an abnormal power, he could touch it with his right hand, and it would cancel it out. That even applied to a miracle of God himself.

“???”

Kamijou stared at the middle school girl (or rather, the unsuccessful homicide criminal). She was giving him a crabby face.

His body had moved unconsciously and evaded the attack. He had experienced this phenomenon once before. That guy, Stiyl Magnus, had whipped out a flame sword, but Kamijou had repelled it without a second though, purely out of conditioned reflexes left over in his body...

But Kamijou had lost his memory.

Moreover, even though all his memories were gone, his knowledge still remained. It was quite the odd state of affairs.

At the time, his body had ostensibly reacted by itself. Even though he didn’t remember, he had actually been attacked with those flame swords before then.

(Which means that this person's someone I'm acquainted with. I see. I know her, do I? Damn it, why the hell did I only know people like this!?)

"Would you stop looking at me like you're about to cry?" Mikoto placed her hands on her hips. "Anyway, if you don't have anything else to do, then move it. I've totally got something to do with this vending machine."

"Ah..."

Kamijou looked back and forth between the machine and the girl called Misaka Mikoto.

She didn't have a shred of consideration for the situation, and she was also the culprit of an attempted murder...but would it be okay *not* to tell her about how he know this vending machine would definitely eat her money just because of that? Well, it wasn't quite that he wanted to not see her disappointed; he was more scared of a homicidal rage when she came to attack him afterward, which she would inevitably do.

"That vending machines seems like it just eats your money."

"I know that already," answered Mikoto succinctly. Okay, now *he* was the one who didn't understand *her* intentions.

"??? You're gonna put money in it even though you know it'll eat it? Is this the donation box for some kind of shrine?"

"You're such an idiot. There's a trick for this machine, an underhanded one that will have it spit out juice for free."

"..."

He got a bad feeling about this. He got a *really* bad feeling about this. This trick...He figured that she must use it a whole ton on a daily basis if she was calling it a "trick". To repeat, Kamijou's two thousand yen bill had been eaten by this machine. Could the reason it was malfunctioning like this possibly be...

"Tokiwadai Middle School style—Old Lady Forty-Five-Degree Angle Machine-Restarting Strike!"

Remarkably, along with the ridiculous ending shout of "Chay-saa!", Mikoto delivered a high kick to the side of the vending machine, while wearing a skirt.

There was a deafening thump. Then they heard something inside the machine rattling around and falling, and shortly after, a can of juice appeared in the dispenser.

"It's all worn-out, so the springs holding in the juice are loose, you know? Trouble is, you never know what's gonna come out...Uh, what's up with you?"

“Nothing,” Kamijou replied in a perfect monotone.

Under her skirt were gym short pants. Somehow, he felt like his dreams had been ruined.

“So if it’s *passed down* at Tokiwadai, does that mean *all* the rich girls there do that?”

“That’s what all-female schools are all about. Don’t go having weird dreams about girls, go it?”

“...” Kamijou thought it was a pretty harsh reality. “That wasn’t it. I wanted to ask: Isn’t the reason the vending machine is broken in the first place because you all come along every single day and gang up on the thing!?”

“It’s fine, isn’t it!? What are you angry for? It’s not like it’s hurting you, right?”

“...”

“Hmm? By the way, how did you figure out this machine was a money eater...” She quieted for a moment before finishing. “...Did your money get eaten?”

“...”

“Huh? It did? It really did!? Hey, quit making fists and trembling like that. Give me a straight answer! Were you spacing out because the vending machine ate your money!?”

“...What would you do if you heard the answer?”

“That’s simple, I’d take a picture with my cell phone and send the idiot’s face out to the world—I’m joking, I’m joking! Stop shuffling forward like you’re gauging distance, it’s scary!”

Kamijou sighed, letting out all his tension from his body.

Taking it out on her wouldn’t bring his two thousand yen back. That two thousand yen had originally been placed in his wallet with the intention of buying some fireworks or something for the freeloading sister in white awaiting his return at the dorms. There was no point in pondering that now, though.

(Losers should just act like losers and follow their homing instincts or something.)

Kamijou let his shoulders fall and turned his back to Mikoto.

She looked at that easily readable back of his and, with her hands still on her waist, breathed a pretty exasperated sigh.

“Wait a second, you. So how much got eaten exactly?”

"...I'm not telling. I can't. I don't want to."

He looked at this girl. They had just met, but he didn't think straight up telling *her* he had lost two thousand yen would lead to her saying, "Oh, you poor thing!" Her responding with a "gahahawahaha!" laugh, like a Sengoku era general, would probably make more sense.

Mikoto's face grew slightly more serious (perhaps, somehow, feeling *something* like responsibility).

"I won't laugh. I promise. And by the way, I'll even get back the money it ate."

(What's with her being this kind!?)

Kamijou's thoughts never arrived at the realization that this was all Mikoto's fault in the first place for kicking the vending machine all the time.

So there Kamijou was, a little scared of being labeled an idiot who managed to get two thousand yen stuck in a machine. However, when Mikoto said, "I said, I won't laugh! I really won't, okay? I really, definitely won't laugh!" he decided to confess, defeated.

"...Two thousand yen."

"Two thousand? Why are you making a fuss about such pocket change?" After saying that, she stopped short as it dawned on her. "Wait, two thousand yen? Wait, you mean like, a two thousand yen bill!? Wow, I wanna see! I totally want to see that! I thought all those bills were extinct! Hehe...Ahahahaha! Of course the vending machine would bug out. Two thousand yen bills aren't even in convenience store registers these days! Ahahahaha!"

Mikoto was getting excited at something weird. Kamijou looked at her, shouted, "You liar!" and automatically buried his face in his hands. *That's* why he didn't want to tell her it was a two thousand yen bill. Him using it on a vending machine also strongly implied he was trying to exchange it for lower currency amounts. This was a two thousand yen bill they were talking about here. Even a department store clerk with a perfectly sculpted, smiling expression would definitely let out a grunt and falter, even if only for a moment.

"I see. Well then, you better start praying that two thousand yen bill comes out... I won't accept it if you give me two one thousand yen bills, got it, you piece of junk?"

Mikoto stood in front of the vending machine, then slowly thrust the palm of her right hand toward the coin insert slot.

"Suddenly Kamijou wasn't so sure about all of this.

"Hey, how are you going to get the money back from this machine?"

“How?”

She gave him a look of blank amazement.

“Like this.”

A moment later, bluish-white sparks launched out of the palm of Mikoto’s hand and struck the vending machine.

A loud noise thundered, and the extremely heavy-looking machine wobbled back and forth like it had been rammed by a sumo wrestler. A mountain of black smoke erupted from the gaps between its metal fittings as if this were some kind of gag manga.

Kamijou paled. In fact, his face turned pure white.

“Huh? That’s weird. I didn’t plan on blasting it that hard. Ah, looks like a ton of juice is coming out. Hey, your two thousand yen’s worth of juice cans are coming out. Is that okay? ...Hey, why are you running away so desperately!? Hey!”

Kamijou didn’t turn around. He sprinted at full speed in an effort to put every centimeter, every millimeter he could between him and that vending machine.

(D-damn it! I don’t know why, but I get the distinct feeling this has happened before!!)

As soon as he thought that...

Though the alarms on the vending machine would remain silent even if kicked, they started to blare with all their might, so that everyone could hear, as if it was mercilessly spewing out all of its pent-up frustration.

Part 2

He didn’t really remember where or how he ran.

What he could say for sure was that he had sprinted all out for about ten minutes.

The next thing he realized, he was seated on the bench at a bus stop in the shopping district. Exhausted, he was staring up at the August sky, which was dyed in orange by the light of the sunset. A blimp was floating through the air. On its side was the X-Vision display, lazily spilling out Academy City’s news for the day, regarding the announcement that the Mizuho Agency, an organization researching muscular dystrophy, had withdrawn from business.

“Quit blissfully running away from reality and hold your drinks, will you? This is your share in the first place.”

Sitting next to him was Mikoto, sighing in exasperation and throwing a whole bunch of juice cans at him. For her part, she was gazing calmly at the propellers on a wind generator, spinning round and round. She might have been a little down in the dumps at having failed to control her power.

“...I’m scared that the moment I accept the juice, I’ll become an accomplice. What should I say, don’t throw it at me—Ow! Hot! Why is this hot shiruko[1] mixed in?”

“The point was to get it to malfunction, so I can’t choose what kind I get!”

“But I’m getting some pretty clear evil signals with this black soybean cider and this condensed kinako milk!”

“Hmm? Hey, count your blessings. You should be thinking my good fortune for not pulling the two demons—the guarana vegetable juice and the strawberry oden soup!”

Academy City was, put another way, a city of experiments.

Its countless universities and research institutions enjoyed testing their “products” in practical applications, so prototypes like garbage-collecting automatons and self-driving security robots filled every corner of the city. And well, this meant that the product lineups on convenience store shelves and in vending machines differed from normal cities, too...

“...It’s all different, but I’ve got half a mind to put in an inquiry regarding the fact that it’s still the same money we students are paying.”

“Come on, it’s fine! It’s okay to be filled with dreams and ambitions and advance one step at a time, isn’t it? Oh, if you’re not gonna drink that coconut cider, then I’ll take it.” Mikoto took one of the macabre juice cans from Kamijou’s arms. “Anyway, you run away from things too easily—including from this one can of juice. It’s like...How do I put it? ...You’re actually strong, but you make people *think* you’re just a weak idiot? Whenever I see that, Mikoto-san gets half a mind to say a thing or two about it.

“...I wonder why it’s only the people who say stuff that totally misses the mark who seem so weirdly egotistical?”

“What was that?” Mikoto looked at Kamijou with the face of a belligerent drunk. “...I don’t think it’s all that far off, really. There are lots of weaklings who go through life trembling in fear, and strong people live haughtily. I think that’s only natural. But you’re different, right? You have the kind of power that can easily force one of the seven Level

[1] Sweet red bean soup

5s in Academy City to back down, so why on earth do you flee all over town whenever you're chased by so much as a hoodlum or a Chihuahua that got off its leash?"

"???"

Mikoto's words were chock-full of confidence, but Kamijou couldn't remember any of it.

If that *was* the case, then either Mikoto's words were a bad guess, or else...Could she know *about his unknown past*? Unable to figure out which it was, Kamijou decided to vaguely bring himself in line with the conversation.

"You know, you should brag more that you defeated me, Misaka Mikoto, the Railgun. Not doing so is an *inexcusable offense to the defeated party*. I mean, don't you see? From now on, everyone will think this their whole lives about me: 'Misaka Mikoto lost to a man who gets chased around by hoodlums and Chihuahuas off their collars?'" Mikoto took a swig of the coconut cider. "You defeated me. So at the very least, you should take responsibility as the victor, or else you'll cause me trouble. I am one of only seven Level 5s in Academy City! At least try hard enough so that I can stick out my chest and say that I lost to a person like you, fairly and openly.

"What are you talking about? I've got no interest in Edo period Bushido morals, so..."

But once he began to say that, a single phrase stuck in his mind made him uncomfortable.

(*You defeated me?* Which means...Did I, the humble Kamijou Touma, take a high-class girl, from a high-class school like Tokiwadai Middle School, push her down, get on top of her, ball my fists, and beat the hell out of her until she cried that she was sorry and would never do it again, is that it? I see, it's only natural that such a man's brain cells would have broken and his memories gotten destroyed, and also, what the hell were you doing while I didn't remember, and also, a girl telling me to "take responsibility" sounds an awful lot like a threat, you know!!)

"Uh, uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

"? Hey, wait, why are you getting all groany like that?" Mikoto sighed. "Man, you're really a pain in the ass, you know that? What, did you pull that from some shounen manga or something?"

Mikoto folded her arms angrily and sighed, though Kamijou, grasping his head in dismay, didn't notice.

"It's that way you do things, you know? Where you never throw your own punches. You just let your opponents beat you to a pulp and perfectly guard all of it. It's so conceited and annoying, and yet it's definitely effective. I won't allow it!"

"...Uhhhhh... huh?"

He refocused on what Mikoto was going on about, still moaning with his head in his hands.

(I never throw my own punches? So then, this was the same kind of power relation as a parent smiling and calming down a child? One who took a joke too seriously and was shaking his fists in the air or something? I never raised a hand against girls, even if I was fighting a lightning user?)

...

(...That's not bad, Kamijou Touma.)

"Huh, I really can't stand you when you look confident, you know that?" Mikoto sounded disinterested. "Here, whatever, just drink your juice. Man getting a gift like this directly from Mikoto-sensei...If you were one of my underclassmen, you'd be swooning and fainting right now!"

"Fainting? There isn't a soul alive who'd be happy about these cans of juice that just barely fulfill the food hygiene laws. Besides, this isn't some shoujo manga, so there're no love stories in an all girl's school."

"...Well. It would be sweet if it *was* just at shoujo manga levels." For some reason, Mikoto averted her eyes. "Everything's pretty busy, okay? Or maybe I should say muddy. You want me to tell you what I get called at school? It'll blow you away!"

Mikoto laughed, without any strength behind it. But then...

"Onee-sama?"

Suddenly, the bell-like voice of a girl sounded out near them, and Mikoto made a face like ice had been plunged into her back. The corners of her mouth twitched, and she scowled deeply.

(O-onee-sama!? What the hell!?)

Kamijou caught his breath at the unexpected shock. He quickly jerked his head to look behind him and saw a girl who looked to be in her first year of middle school, wearing the same uniform as Mikoto, standing a little away from them. With brown hair in twintails, she clasped her hands in front of her and made her eyes sparkle.

"Oh my, Onee-sama! My, oh my, Onee-sama! I thought those silly remedial classes didn't suit you, but I never would have guessed you'd be using them as an excuse for *this*!"

Kamijou looked beside him; Mikoto looked about ready to panic. It's not like he had any power, but he strangely felt like she had transmitted an internal cry straight to his mind, forbidding him from butting in.

She pressed on her temples like she had a headache and began to speak to the mystery girl.

"Umm...I just want to be sure. What might you be referring to when you say *this*?"

"Well, obviously, it was in order to rendezvous with this gentleman here, was it not?"

Sparks came from Mikoto's hair.

The twintailed girl didn't mind, though. This time, she flashed a full smile at Kamijou, who was currently watching blankly, and approached their bench terrifyingly quickly.

(Oh, shit, she came over here!)

He was about to jolt off the bench in spite of himself, but before he could, the girl grabbed hold of his hand and covered it with both of hers.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, gentleman. My name is Shirai Kuroko, and I'm Onee-sama's squire."

"Uh-huh." Kamijou struggled to find a reaction. His gaze was steadily lowering to the hand she had clasped.

"By the way, if this is all it takes to get you flustered, she might have to worry about you being prone to...adultery, you know?"

Kamijou sputtered like he was a volcano about to erupt.

Mikoto wobbled up out of her seat beside him and said, "Listen here, you...Does this weirdo *look* like my boyfriend!?"

As she delivered those subtly wounding words, Mikoto let loose a spear of lightning from her bangs.

But just before the pale blue electricity hit her, Shirai Kuroko let go of Kamijou's hand. The next time he blinked, she had disappeared into thin air without a word.

Mikoto clicked her tongue. "She used that stupid Teleport of hers. I swear if you start spreading strange rumors, I'm coming after you, damn it!"

She fired a few more bolts at the empty space. People passing by gathered their attention to the Biribiri Level 5. Kamijou, with his head in his hands, wondered how he was going to calm her down. However, all of a sudden, a voice came at them from behind the bench.

Mikoto furiously attacked the empty space with her explosive lightning attacks, looking hell-bent on giving somebody a good electrical shock. Kamijou wondered how he was going to calm her down, when suddenly a voice came from behind the bench.

“Onee-sama?”

(Not again!?)

Kamijou turned around.

Behind the bench stood another Misaka Mikoto.

“Eh?”

There was no doubt that the person standing there was Misaka Mikoto. She had brown shoulder-length hair, a well-featured face, a white short-sleeved blouse, a summer sweater, and a pleated skirt. There she was—a perfect Misaka Mikoto, from her height to her clothes and smaller articles.

However...

Kamijou returned his eyes to the bench seat next to him. Brown shoulder-length hair, a well-featured face, a white short-sleeved blouse, a summer sweater, and a pleated skirt—Misaka Mikoto was obviously sitting right there.

The difference was that the girl standing behind the bench was wearing something akin to night-vision goggles on her forehead as if they were swimming goggles. In addition, the glint in her eyes made it seem like they weren’t focused on any one thing, but rather were trying to chase everything coming into her sight. Those ambiguously unfocused eyes intently followed the back of Mikoto’s head.

“...Wait, what? There’s more of you!? Misaka Unit Two!”

Kamijou was flabbergasted. He looked at the faces of the two Misaka Mikoto’s in turn. The one on the bench next to him had a similarly astonished look, but the one standing behind the bench was staring at them without a trace of expression.

“So,” he hazarded, looking over his shoulder, “who might you be?”

“I am her little sister, says Misaka as she states in a flash.”

"..."

(What an odd way of talking.)

Kamijou thought, though he decided not to say it. There were too many people close to Kamijou who talked funny. He didn't realize that he was one of them himself, though.

"But your name is 'Misaka something', and you're calling yourself Misaka? You're not Misaka Misaka, you know. You normally put your given name there, right? Wouldn't it get confusing if you went by Misaka at your house?"

"But Misaka's name is Misaka, answers Misaka immediately."

"..."

(She can't actually be named Misaka Misaka, but it seems there's some weird, unspoken rules coming into place here.)

Kamijou looked at Mikoto to throw him a life preserver, but he clammed up again when he saw her face. For some reason, she was silently glaring at her (apparently identical) younger sister.

"I-I see, you're her little sister. Wow, you two look a lot alike. Could it be that your heights and weights are the same, too?"

Mikoto had been staring at her little sister for a while.

"We're identical on the genetic level, replies Misaka. Also, it is rude to bring up the topic of body weight with a girl, says Misaka as she says to herself.

Mikoto had been staring at her little sister for quite a while now.

"..."

(What a strange person,) thought Kamijou.

"If you're the same on a genetic level, then that means you're twins! Hmm. I've never seen identical twins before, but man, they really do look alike, huh? Anyway, what do you need, Twin-chan? Going home with your big sister?

Mikoto had been staring at her little sister for a long, long while at this point.

"What a fresh mouth this flippant jerk has, thinks Misaka. Misaka will swallow her true opinion and answer your question. Misaka detected an equivalent power in a zone six hundred meters in radius centered on Misaka, so Misaka came to take a look..."

It seemed perfectly logical that similar abilities would appear for identical twins.

It was logical, but...Kamijou finally started to get scared of the look on Mikoto's face.

(That's bad...Is she the kind of person who hates showing her family's faces and stuff to her friends on parents' day at school?)

"...There was a broken vending machine at the site, and you two are in possession of a large amount of juice. Misaka never thought that Onee-sama would have a hand in petty theft, says Misaka as she clicks her tongue." Misaka's sister was still standing straight and stiff. "What means have you used to win Onee-sama over? inquires Misaka as she wants to be sure.

She was placing him under strange suspicions, so there was no other choice but to continue the conversation.

"Hey, the principal offender here was *her*. I was just a bystander!"

Making false claims constitutes a crime, answers Misaka. As a result of measuring the front of the vending machine via its reflectivity, Misaka has discovered that the most recent fingerprints left on it were yours, accuses Misaka as she has veritable proof.

"No way! You can deduce that much as an Electromaster!?"

"I am kidding, says Misaka as she replies straightly."

"..."

"..."

(Help me!)

Kamijou was tugging on Mikoto's shoulder while still looking at her sister.

But no matter how long he waited, she didn't say anything to her.

(That's weird. I've only known her for ten minutes, but I can clearly tell that she'd just keep talking by herself even if no one asked her to. How is it possible that she's keeping silent now that someone is saying bad stuff about her?)

"...?"

Kamijou casually looked toward the girl in the seat next to him. Then...

"...You! Why the hell are you loafing around in a place like this!?"

Suddenly, an angry yell exploded from Mikoto, who had been quiet until now.

Kamijou nearly leaned back from the ear-splitting shout that cut them off. That shrill voice girls have pierced into his earholes and a sensation not unlike brain freeze assaulted him.

Mikoto only shouted once before resuming her silence.

As if she was waiting for her sister's reply.

They were enveloped by an empty silence, like the kind that happens after lightning strikes.

A blimp was wandering through the night sky. The X-Vision screen plastered on its side was repeating today's news that a new computer virus called HDC.Cerberus was wreaking havoc on the Internet. The voice announcing it resounded cryptically.

Below all that, Misaka's sister, still standing rigid as a pole, looked into Mikoto's eyes with a dazed stare.

"If you must ask, Misaka is in training right now, says Misaka as she responds concisely."

"Tra..."

Mikoto sucked in her breath like someone had hit her in the back, then turned her eyes away. She muttered something under her breath, but Kamijou didn't catch it.

"??? In training? Did your sister enter Judgment or something?"

When someone with the rank of student hears the words "training", Judgment is usually the thing that immediately comes to mind.

As one might have figured out from Mikoto's power, abilities boast more capacity for casualties than a poorly handled knife. With more than 2.3 million residents in Academy City, there would, of course, be a specialized agency for dealing with espers that go out of control.

There were two groups that suppress rampaging espers: Anti-Skill, a force of teachers wielding next-generation weaponry, and Judgment, made up of espers elected from each of the schools.

Both Anti-Skill and Judgment were nothing more than run-of-the-mill teachers and students when one got right down to it. Because of that, however, they must sign nine contractual agreements, take thirteen different aptitude tests, and overcome four months of training before they're able to call themselves professionals.

Mikoto clapped her hands together in front of her face and, for some reason, excellently averted her eyes from his. "Um. Ah, Judgment? Ah, yeah, that's it. That's what's going

on, so when things like this happen, I get in a bunch of trouble. A bunch. Or maybe a crunch?"

She said all that in a fantastically fishy tone of voice.

"Hey, why does all this suddenly sound like a phone scam? The more you talk, the less information you're giving me."

"N-no, it isn't! I'm speaking distinctly and clearly, yeah, distincti-clearly!" Then Mikoto turned her eyes to her sister. "It's just that there's a lot I need to say. A lot. Hey, Sis, would you come over here a sec?"

"Huh? No, Misaka has a schedule to keep, says—"

"*Forget that*." Mikoto stared at her younger sister in the eyes. "*Come over here*."

Her oddly level voice weighed on Kamijou's mind for some reason.

It's not like Mikoto really *did* anything. She just looked at the face of her sister, smiled, and said one thing. But that one thing...An unknown whirlpool of emotion within it stuck right in his core.

Mikoto looked at him. The only thing there now was the face of a completely normal, if loud, middle school student.

"Well, we're heading down this way. You should be mindful of your curfew, too!"

She left behind Kamijou, still sitting on the bench, and wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulders. The absolutely identical pair of girls started walking down the wide road.

He slumped in his seat. Then, gazing at the blimp floating along the night sky, he murmured, "Seems like a complicated"—he paused—"family situation, I guess?"

Part 3

There was a problem, though.

"Yeah, that's right! What am I gonna do with all this juice?"

Kamijou stared befuddled at the mountain of nineteen drink cans on the bench (Mikoto had consumed just one: the coconut cider), but in the end, he was going to have to physically carry them all.

(Three hundred and fifty times nineteen, so 6.65 kilograms, huh. I guess it's what they say: the dust just piles up and up.)

His futile calculations brought him even deeper into despair. He was in about the same mental state as an acrophobic who had just carelessly peeked beneath a suspension bridge.

And with this and that, Kamijou tottered back home in the red afternoon light with an armful of cans. The road leading through the residential district was narrow, with nothing but student dorms on either side, and there weren't many cars. But it was the one kind of place where if you started thinking that a car *wouldn't* come along, you might be sent flying by the rear end of a car that suddenly leaped out of a garage in reverse.

Unfortunate though he was, even Kamijou wasn't accustomed enough to misfortune to smile and be killed by a car five minutes away from home.

"Getting back's gonna be a hike," said Kamijou, psyching himself up and readjusting the juice he was carrying.

The cold cans had been in his hands for a while, and they were starting to steal away quite a bit of his body heat.

(Why do I have to be nearly frozen to death during this stupidly hot Japanese summer!?)

All of a sudden, Kamijou noticed a tennis ball on the ground at his feet, and he snapped out of his thoughts.

(Was someone playing with it and just left it here afterward?)

"Whoa, there."

He had been just barely about to step on it, but he stopped his upraised foot and shifted it a little to the side to try and avert disaster.

(Jeez, that was close. If I had tripped over this thing, it would have spelled disaster!)

As he thought of that...

...A sudden gust of wind appeared.

They swaying ball slid into the space between his foot and the ground as if the whole thing had been calculated.

"Egh! Wait, you little—"

He had already started to put his body weight into that leg—he couldn't stop his foot at this point. All his weight came down on the ball perfectly, and he toppled over backward.

There was so much juice in his hands that he couldn't fall safely, either. His back slammed into the ground, driving all the air out of his lungs, and he writhed in place without even enough to muster a "such misfortune."

The cans of juice that he *was* carrying scattered and rolled all over the place, clinking and clanking, but for the moment, he just laid there sprawled out and took some deep breaths.

(Well, they're just cans of juice, so it probably doesn't matter if some of them get dented.)

"D-damn it. What did I do to deserve this..." he huffed, finally sitting himself upright.

Seeing the nineteen cans spread out over such a large area made him feel hopeless.

"Do I really have to pick up six kilograms of this stuff again?" he whined to himself.

Still, it wasn't like he had any other solutions. When all was said and done, he was going to have to gather them up by himself, all alone.

As Kamijou bent over to do so, a shadow fell directly over him.

(...A cloud?)

Kamijou automatically looked up.

Misaka Mikoto was standing there.

(Whoa!?)

Kamijou flinched, then took a step back from the crushing pressure of the silent middle school girl looking down at him.

"You, uh...Huh? Didn't you go somewhere with your little sister? I mean, if you want more juice, I can give you two or three cans."

"..."

Mikoto did not respond to what he said.

(That's weird.)

Kamijou suddenly remembered something. Mikoto had told him this, with this, with a bit of lightning thrown in, just before: that he should take the minimum responsibility

as the victor, since he defeated her. That he should act in a way that she can stick out her chest and declare, fairly and openly, that she had lost to this man.

How was he supposed to do that right now? The Kamijou Touma in question had just stepped on a tennis ball, fallen onto the pavement, flung cans of juice all over the road, and was in the process of bending over and picking up the cans, feeling sorry for himself. And finally...

(Gah!? She got too close, this is bad, at this angle I can see up her skirt—Hey, wait, wasn't she just wearing short pants before, why did she class-change into panties!?)

Despite currently being confused about a few different things, he was aware looking straight at it would make anyone mad.

Mikoto looked down at Kamijou with eyes that seemed to have lost all emotion.

"If you require assistance, then Misaka will help you, says Misaka as she sighs.

"???"

Kamijou stared for a moment in suspicion at Mikoto. She was far from sighing—she was breathing so quietly it struck him as strange.

That was when he finally noticed the night-vision goggles in her hands.

"Oh, okay, it's the sister. You know, you really do look like Mikoto."

"...Mikoto? asks Misaka as she responds. Ah, you mean Onee-sama?"

"Who else would I be talking about?"

(As always, she's setting her own pace.)

"...I see. You're Misaka Imouto[2]. No wonder I thought she class-changed away from short pants."

"Short...?"

"No, that was just me talking to myself! Uh, anyway, right! What are those rough-looking military goggles you've got there?"

"Unlike Onee-sama, Misaka has no skill at seeing the flow of electricity or magnetism, so Misaka requires an apparatus to visualize them, says Misaka as she politely explains in detail."

[2] From now on, this character will be known as Misaka Imouto, rather than little sister.

"..."

(Don't go thinking that you sound polite just because you used some fancy words.)

"The heat and humidity were high, so Misaka removed them. However, if you feel it is necessary, then Misaka will equip them, says Misaka as she makes a suggestion."

Misaka Imouto pulled the goggles over her forehead, muttering something to herself.

"Hm, eh? But weren't you carried off by your sister before?"

"Misaka came from that direction, says Misaka as she points."

Misaka Imouto pointed down the road. For some reason it was the completely wrong direction.

"?" Kamijou tilted his head in confusion.

"In any case, what will you do about the littered juice cans? asks Misaka as she inquires. If you leave them here, it will conflict with the road traffic law and you may be fined any amount up to 150,000 yen, says Misaka as she elaborates."

"...Right, sorry. I'll pick them all up, so go away."

He knew that she hadn't said that in a nasty or bitter way or anything, but being told to get something done *now* because he was bothering people around him managed to touch a nerve.

As he silently picked up the cans of juice one by one...

"If necessary, Misaka will help as well, says Misaka as she proposes."

"Eh? It's okay, I'll do it. Besides, you've got no reason to help me, do you?"

But then, at the worst possible moment, a small truck came rolling down the residential roadway. It screeched to a halt in front of Kamijou and Misaka Imouto, and its driver honked the horn at them a few times in exasperation.

"..."

Without another word, Misaka Imouto began to collect the juice making a mess on the road. He felt a little ashamed at making a girl he didn't really know help him fix his own blunder. However, the truck's horn had been beeping at them to hurry up since it arrived, so he couldn't even say that. Having no other choice, he settled on the gender equality option: each of them picking up half.

He found himself unable to leave it like that, though, so he said shortly, "Sorry. I'll buy you an ice cream at the convenience store later or something, so I hope you—!"

As he was saying that, he looked at Misaka Imouto again and caught his breath in spite of himself.

The defenselessly crouching Misaka Imouto wasn't giving a thought to her particularly short skirt. He got a peek at some kind of white-and-blue stripes between her legs.

As Misaka Imouto squat, she looked up at Kamijou expressionlessly.

"...What is it? asks Misaka as she wants confirmation."

"Ee...! N-nothing, it's nothing, okay? It's absolutely nothing, okay?"

"You say that, but your dilating pupils, restless respiratory action, and abnormalities in pulse are being detected, says Misaka as she shows her objective assessment. In conclusion, you are in a state of excitement, are you not? asks Misa—"

"No, it's nothing! It's really nothing! I'm really sorry!"

"?"

Misaka Imouto's head tilted, puzzled, like she wanted to ask who he was apologizing to.

Then the truck blared that miserable horn again. Kamijou got a move on like someone had kicked him in the butt and went back to picking up the juice.

Once they were finished, the truck violently proceeded on its way, indeed seeming quite angry. Incidentally, as the truck drove by, Misaka Imouto's skirt flipped up. She still didn't push it back down.

(Hmm...I think I might have figured out how to tell these sisters apart.)

Kamijou sighed. Mikoto didn't leave herself this unprotected—she wore gym short pants under her skirt.

"Now then, where shall Misaka bring this juice? asks Misaka as she has her arms full of juice cans."

"Ah? It's alright, I can carry them myself."

Now then, where shall Misaka bring this juice? says Misaka as she insists."

"I said it's okay, you don't have to. It's not your responsibility or anything."

"Make it quick."

She sharpened her voice. Kamijou gave up and let Misaka Imouto carry the load.

Fortunately, his dormitory was only a five-minute walk away. It was a dreary place, what with all the identical buildings lined up next to each other. Actually, it was apparently the number one wind turbine location in Academy City, since the building winds all funneled into the same direction.

They slipped into what was practically a back alley, then he turned the entrance doorknob, casting doubt as to whether or not the security systems were actually working, and headed for the elevator.

As they headed there, a cleaning robot appeared in front of them and approached. It was basically an oil drum, eight centimeters tall and forty in diameter, with tires and a revolving mop plugged onto it.

The description thus far wouldn't have been an unusual sight in Academy City, but the next part was a bit different. Atop the flat head of the cleaning robot, there was a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old maid, meekly sitting seiza-style, kneeling with legs tucked underneath her thighs.

"Heya, Kamijou Touma!"

Her name was Tsuchimikado Maika. She was the stepsister of Kamijou's neighbor, Tsuchimikado Motoharu. She apparently wore a maid uniform because she was going to housekeeping school (read: a maid school). At first she might have looked like a runaway who had fled the girls' dorms after something bad happened so she could take a breather. However, it hadn't been very long at all since he lost his memories. He kept on seeing her around here, so it seemed like she was just routinely sneaking into the place.

"My air conditioner was broken today so I came to sleep over! I think my brother and I are both gonna get pretty loud tonight, so please have some patience, okay?"

"...Huh, housekeeping school must be a pain. You've got no summer break!"

"Well, our school teaches that true maids don't need any off time, you know! There's no Saturday or Sunday for maids in training, so if they don't enact a couple of days off during the week here and there, we'd all up and collapse."

"But is a *slacker maid* really in demand in this glacial epoch?"

"Actually, in a way, 'incomplete' maids are in higher demand than the perfect ones, but...Oh. By the way, Kamijou Touma. Are those the spoils of war from Operation Win the Lottery?"

"No, I paid for these properly (probably). I got them form a bit of a dirty job, but you can have one if you want."

"If you have green tea, then I'll take that."

"...Sure, if you count green tea milk as green tea."

Tsuchimikado Maika ended up reaching out with her tiny hand and taking the powdered green tea milk out of Kamijou's arms. Then the cleaning robot diverted its path around Kamijou and Misaka Imouto. Maika, still sitting seiza-style, waved her arm good-bye in a long arc.

"One last thing. The first trick to giving shelter to runaway girls! Don't leave them alone in your room during daytime. In a peaceful city, the easiest way to feed them is to let them loose outside and then pick them up when night falls. If you leave one in your room 24-7, 365 days a year, the noise from her living there will leak out in no time and the neighboring residents might catch on. And also, that nun is making a really big ruckus in your room, did you know?"

The cleaning robot carrying the sitting girl rolled away somewhere.

"You have hobbies of imprisoning girls? asks Misaka as she inquires a little seriously."

"Don't get all serious. I'm just harboring a freeloader," declared Kamijou.

Though, what did the law have to say on that matter? Kamijou earnestly hoped this wouldn't be termed "abducting a minor," or anything along those lines.

Kamijou and Misaka Imouto boarded the elevator, the cables of which seemed like they would snap if a sumo wrestler got in, and headed for the seventh floor.

The cheap sounding electric noise rang out, heralding the elevator's arrival on the seventh story. His dormitory building was roughly rectangular, so the only things greeting them as they stepped off was a straight hallway.

Just ahead, in the vicinity of Kamijou's room's door, were mysteriously new metal handrails. Kamijou had gathered it had happened before losing his memory, so he didn't know why, but it appeared that some idiot had blown off the railing with fire. When he looked closely, there were spots here and there on the walls and floor that looked like new as well.

Crouched before the door were Index and Himegami Aisa, facing each other and looking at the calico cat. They had their hands extended to it and were fawning over it. The cat, surrounded and being pampered by two sets of hands, was rolling around the floor.

"...Huh, what are they doing over there? Hey! What's wrong, you lose the key to the room and lock yourselves out?" Kamijou called.

The two of them looked over.

"Ah, it's Touma! No, Sphinx has fleas, so we were—Hey, wait! Touma, you brought along another girl again!"

The girl who cried out was Index, a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl. Though her name was 100 percent fake, she was clad in a plush, gold-embroidered nun's habit with a white background; it looked like a teacup. Apparently in some world she was called the "Index Librorum Prohibitorum", but Kamijou had been giving her the decidedly more subtle treatment of "freeloader who appeared without my knowing."

"Perhaps you were born under *those* stars. You start to build up the various routes. As if you were triggering flags."

The girl who lazily remarked on him was Himegami Aisa, a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl. She looked the gold standard of a shrine maiden, with long black hair and a red-and-white priestess uniform. Despite that, a large silver cross hanging from her neck stood out against them. As well it should—it was apparently a barrier made to seal the power she held called Deep Blood.

Kamijou remembered that Index had told him something along these lines about the cross:

"Touma, Touma. Don't touch Aisa's Celtic cross, okay? After all, it's a cross extracted from just part of the Walking Church that maintains a minimal barrier. Hmm, if we compared it to a normal church, I guess it would be like carrying around just the big cross on its roof."

"Hm. Then that means if my right hand touches it, it'd break."

".....Yes. Just like what happened with my habit."

"Hmm? What? I couldn't hear you."

"Nothing! I didn't say anything, and I'm not thinking anything!"

After that, Index's face flushed for some reason, and she had bitten into his head as if she was taking something out on him. Anyway, the gist of it seemed to be that he should never, ever touch that cross.

Incidentally, now that the cross had sealed her powers, Himegami had been judged as a Level 0 by the elite private school she was attending and was about to get kicked out. It wasn't unusual for private schools to have an enrollment criteria of being a Level 2 or above. If you consider how athletes who got into a college on sports scholarships are treated when they injure themselves and are unable to exercise, it should be easy to understand her situation.

In reality, if she just took off the cross, Deep Blood would apparently reactivate, but she didn't seem to have any plans to ever remove it.

With this and that, she had automatically been driven from her school dormitory. If she left Academy City, though, she might be targeted by magicians seeking the power of

Deep Blood. From what Kamijou had heard, Himegami was wandering around aimlessly wondering what she should do when Kamijou's homeroom teacher, Komoe-sensei, picked her up and turned her into a freeloader.

Some might think it extremely unlikely to just run into someone like that in a city as big as this one, but spots where runaway girls naturally gather in actually exist. Komoe-sensei was a specialist in things like social psychology, environmental psychology, behavioral psychology, and traffic psychology. He heard that she made a hobby of going around to those kinds of places, finding delinquent girls, and bringing them under her guardianship. Kamijou, meanwhile, got this weird ill omen that once summer break ended, he'd be in for a "shocking" transfer student even, effectively utilizing the kind of flags *she* had raised.

Himegami glanced at the mountain of juice cans he was carrying and asked, "Anyway. What is that mountain of treasure? Are you a sickly child who can't drink tap water?"

"Course not. Besides, juice is worse for your body anyway." He sighed at her. "Come on, Index, you're in charge of this stuff."

"Mgh. I like juice, but I don't like those 'pull tab' things. Touma, open it for me!"

Unaccustomed to modern culture, Index apparently wasn't able to open the pull tabs on the cans. It wasn't that she didn't know how or that she wasn't strong enough to—it was more like she thought, "Uh, if I try to open this too hard, I'll break a nail."

The pull tab-phobic Index turned her gaze to Misaka Imouto, who was standing next to Kamijou, also with an armful of juice.

"Sigh. Touma, your encounter rate with problem girls is too high! And besides, you wouldn't listen if one told you not to get involved anyway. So who is this girl, where's she from, and what's she do?"

"If you want my personal view, I think she is an ill-fated girl on the run from a mysterious organization."

"Would you be quiet? You're one-sidely treating every single person around me like they're unlucky," Kamijou complained, juice cans in hand. "...Anyway, you said something before I can't let go, didn't you? What do you mean by the cat has fleas?"

"Yeah," Index replied, nodding in assent. "One morning I woke up and Sphinx was covered in fleas. I think your futon is probably a total mess and stuff."

"Don't 'and stuff' me! Don't put things like cats into futons! In addition, all the hair it sheds is gonna be a pain in the ass! Wait, I had been thinking I was itchy for some reason. Was that what happened!? Agh!" Kamijou cried. "And also, why are you leaving the room alone!? Won't it turn into some demon cave with all the reproduced fleas!? So that's why you two are outside! Damn it!"

The doorknob was right in front of him, but he hesitated to open it.

Then, disregarding him, Index plunged a hand into her sleeve and started rustling around for something.

"...Uh, Index. Why are you taking green leaves out of your clothes?"

"It's called sage. Strange thing, apparently it grows around outside. Did you know that?"

"..."

The usage of drugs is fundamental to Academy City's esper development. Medicinal knowledge began to flow into his mind like a historical timeline.

Sage—a perennial plant of the Lamiales order, native to places on the Mediterranean Sea. Its leaves are called salvia. In addition to its medicinal usage, it is also cultivated as a spice and as a decoration...That was about all he knew.

"So what are you gonna do with some herbs? Chomp down on them to recover your HP?"

"Eich pee?" Index tilted her head. "I don't really understand that mysterious language you keep using, but sage is used for purification. I am about to use it to drive away the fleas like magic."

"...I've got a really bad feeling about that. Are you going to feed those leaves to the cat? Or are you feeding them to the fleas?"

"Urk. I'm going to light the sage on fire and fumigate Sphinx with smoke to drive them away."

"....."

"I have enough common sense not to burn stuff inside the room!"

"....."

Kamijou looked at Index's face—her super-serious, super-sincere, and super-straight face.

(Well, fleas are living creatures, too, so I can understand them hating smoke...I get that, but...)

Then Himegami clapped her hands together in an exceedingly carefree manner.

"Don't be quiet. That's where you butt in. At this rate, a yummy herbal steaming of the cat will be ready soon."

Kamijou had felt his awareness sinking into the depths of the sea, but he resurfaced at what the shrine maiden said.

"...Ah! Yes, right! Don't you know what the scariest part of a fire is, Index? If you cover the cat with smoke to get rid of the fleas, the cat will die along with them!"

(I'm so glad that Himegami's normal at least,)

Kamijou felt thoroughly relieved. In the meantime, Himegami reached a hand into the sleeve of her shrine maiden clothing and began rustling around for something.

"...Hey, wait, Himegami. What are you taking out of *your* sleeve?"

"Hm? If you must ask, I must answer that it is a magical spray."

No matter how he looked at it, he only saw a bottle of pesticide.

".....Umm. What are you doing with...that?"

"I'm just going to point the magical spray at the vermin and spray it."

"...Like I said, the cat is a living being just like the fleas are, so don't bring out some Academy City experimental two-second cockroach killer! Would *you* immediately spray your face with bug killer if a fly landed on your face!?"

The two of them looked at each other with a puzzled look, and if Kamijou's hands weren't full, he'd probably have buried his face in them. What was so difficult, one might ask? The two of them were going to do these things because they were honestly worried about the cat, that's what was so tough.

Suddenly, Misaka Imouto, who had been silent until now, opened her mouth to speak.

"If we are to be exchanging opinions on this, would it not be more effective to do so after putting down this juice? asks Misaka as she suggests with her arms full."

"Hm? Oh, right. Let's just put them down on the floor. Sorry. As thanks, I'll give you one if you want."

"It's not necessary, says Misaka as she responds. Then Misaka will begin placing them on the floor. The seventh story is quite high up, so please be careful not to drop any to the ground, says Misaka as she cautions and continues her work."

Misaka Imouto's movements, logically consistent and evocative of a top-class sommelier, caused Index's and Himegami's own movements to come to a halt. They looked somehow shocked, in contrast to their usual troublemaking selves.

"...Wow. Touma, Touma. She looks just like a maid of honor at Windsor Castle."

"...She might bear a close resemblance to the robotic maid projects from ages past."

Misaka Imouto didn't twitch an eyebrow at what they said.

"And now, as for what approach to take with the cat—"

"Whoa, nice job ignoring them...Or, I mean, you got an idea?"

"—It's not so much an 'idea', but Misaka recommends the simple usage of a commercial flea remover, says Misaka as she offers a suggestion. There should be a variety that is powdered medicine, and by spreading it onto the cat's body surface, the fleas will fall off."

"...Hmm, but it's still medicine. Couldn't that be harmful?"

Some might think it odd that a student of Academy City would say that—the city included the administration of drugs in its Curriculum—but no matter what one thought, this kitten wasn't even a year old. The standards of "harmful" and "benign" medicines are different for an esper, since espers have built up an immunity to medicines over many years.

However, Misaka Imouto didn't seem to be paying it any consideration (though she never had an expression to being with).

"There is no medicine in this world that is harmless, says Misaka as she replies immediately and confidently. Between the detriment of the fleas and that of medicine, the former is likely more severe, says Misaka as she elaborates."

"..."

"The harm caused by pests like fleas and ticks is not something that ends with a simple case of dermatitis, says Misaka as she continues. In the worst case, they could possibly be the trigger to create an allergic reaction severe enough to endanger its life, says Misaka as she worries.

"Mgh," grunted Kamijou, falling silent.

Well, surely they say that abuse of cold medicine leads to lowered immunity, but when nightmares happen because of a 40°C fever, they have no choice but to use them. Kamijou understood that logically, but when looking at the cat, rolling around on the floor, something seemed illogical for some reason. Perhaps it rolling about like that was an act taken to rid itself of the fleas on its body.

(Is there something that can be done without resorting to drugs?)

Kamijou folded his hands while deep in thought, when Misaka Imouto abruptly spoke.

“The idea is to get rid of the fleas from the cat’s body surface without using medicine, correct? asks Misaka as she confirms. Of course, under the condition smoke or pesticide is not used.”

“...Look, I don’t think either of them is doing this out of some malicious intent.”

“If anything, them being without malice means they are beyond salvation, says Misaka as she replies with an astonished look,” Misaka Imouto answered, still completely expressionless. “In any case, you are the one who needs to supervise those two, says Misaka as she gives a warning. If you do not remove those girls from the cat immediately, Misaka has a feeling property damage laws may be applied to this case, says Misaka as she adds on.”

“...Which reminds me...Legally, were the lives of animals treated as property? That kinda sucks.” Kamijou thought, half-seriously, that they should make new laws for it. “Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Then, of course rejecting crazy ideas like smoke or pesticide, how would Misaka Imouto get rid of the fleas?”

The nun and the shrine maiden’s shoulders twitched in unison.

“I see. Touma is going to rely on the girl he just met instead of me. I see, I see.”

“This is it. The older characters disappear. Hahaha. We really are beyond salvation.”

“...”

Kamijou decided to just ignore them already.

Looking at his drawn face, Misaka Imouto mentioned, still without expression, “Misaka will ask once more. The point is to get rid of the fleas on the surface of the cat’s body without resorting to pesticide or smoke and also without relying on medicine, correct? asks Misaka as she confirms one final time.”

“Well, yeah, but how?”

“Like this, says Misaka as she answers immediately.”

Misaka Imouto waved the palm of her hand toward the balled-up calico cat.

In that moment, the sound of static electricity surging out of her hand exploded. The corpses of fleas fell from the cat’s fur as if it had shaken off sand and sprinkled it all over. Sphinx’s hair bristled and it bounced around, struggling—and just before it dove off the seventh story, Himegami caught it by the neck.

“Misaka has destroyed only the fleas by using a specific frequency, says Misaka as she reports. This type of insect repellent is sold normally at major volume sellers, so it should be safe and smooth.”

She glanced at the door. “For inside the room, Misaka believes that by using a smoke-emitting type of pesticide, you should be able to exterminate them easily, says Misaka as she offers advice.”

“Now then, if we are done here—” Misaka Imouto turned her back and began to walk away without waiting for any thanks.

Index watched her back as it retreated, then finally said briefly, “Touma, Touma. I think that is exactly what a ‘perfect and cool beauty’ is.”

Taking the opportunity, Touma interjected with equal brevity, “I know I’m really asking for it here, but do you think you could please learn a little something from her?”

CHAPTER 2

Radio Noise.

Level2(Product_Model).

Part 1

He had tutoring the next day, too.

It seemed sorrowful, watching a student sitting in the middle of the classroom on an evening. At first, Kamijou thought, “Come on, is this an elementary school of a depopulated town?” but as it went on for three to four days and then five to six days, the brightness of his soul had disappeared, and tutoring only left him feeling sick of it.

But that tutoring would be over in two days, today included. Kamijou could have felt hopeless that “Summer break finally starts on August 22!?” but he was happy to be getting out of tutoring at all.

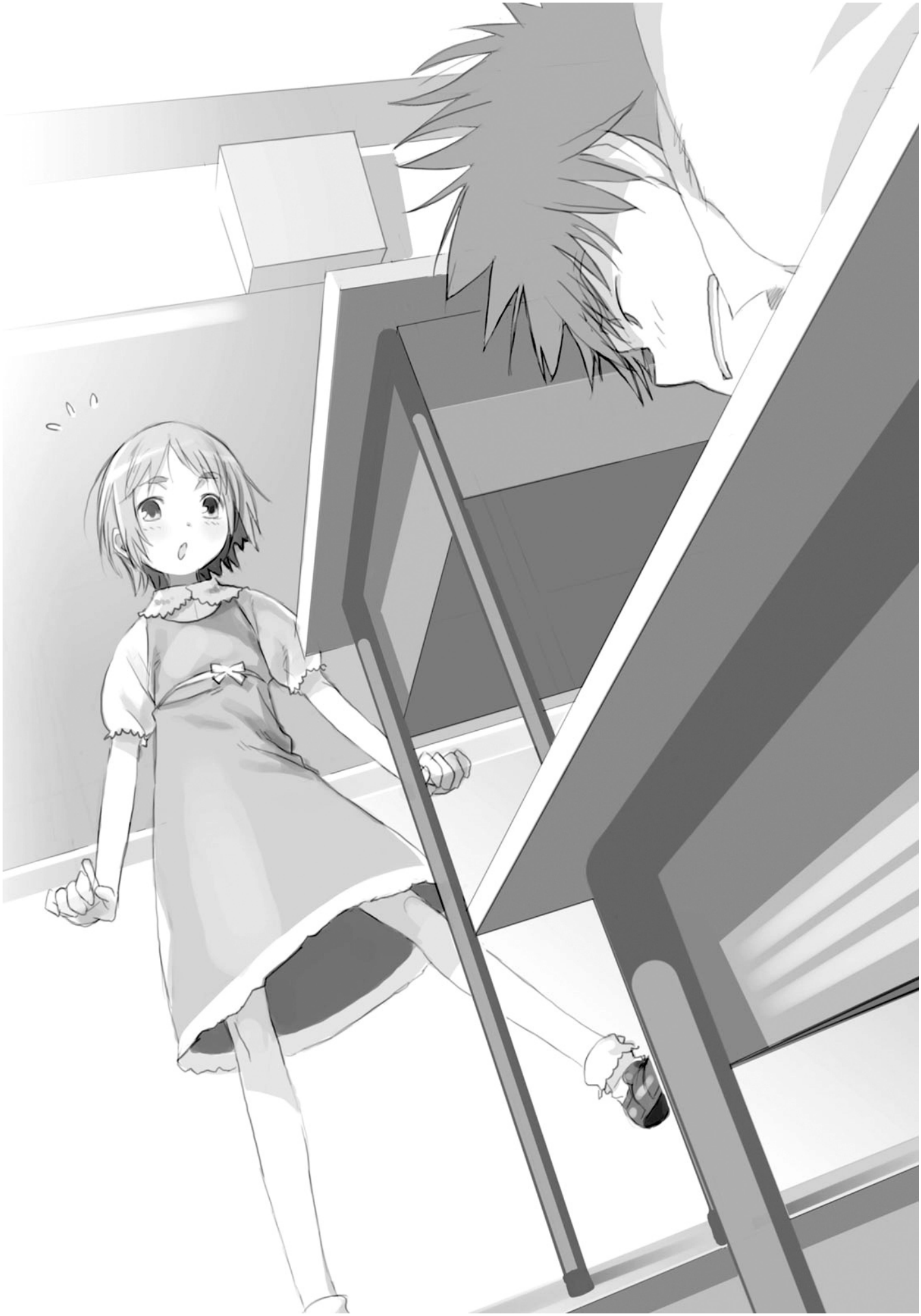
Kamijou stared at the teacher’s desk in front of him.

There stood a twelve-year-old-looking female teacher with a height of 135 centimeters, Tsukuyomi Komoe, showing only her face. She was talking with her paper placed on the desk, but Kamijou wondered why she had put it on the desk. It would have been far easier to read if she had just held the paper in her hands.

“So for the ESP card experiment, the card’s material is changing from vinyl resin to ABS resin, a needed condition reinstituted by America in 1992. This is a trick in which the fingerprints on the card make it possible to figure out what the flipped-down card is... Hey, Kamijou-chan, are you listening?”

“...Yes, Komoe-sensei. I am listening, but what does this have to do with esper powers?”

Kamijou was a Level 0. By the check of a peerless machine, he was told that no matter how much effort he put in, he wouldn’t be able to even twist a single spoon, but it didn’t make sense that he was getting tutored because he was “weak”.



It looked like Komoe-sensei seemed to know about the contradiction, as she said, “You can’t give up just because you don’t have any power. If you give up, things you can achieve won’t get achieved. So, by learning the basic basics of power, I think that you can find the way of finding your very own skill.”

“Sensei.”

“Yes?”

“...Well, you seem to be working very hard, but things that can’t get achieved won’t be achieved.”

“Kamijou-chan! I can’t say that effort will always lead to success, but people that never try will never succeed! Even Misaka-san from Tokiwadai Middle School, who ranks third out of all 2.3 million people here, started out as a Level 1, but she worked hard and got all the way up to Level 5! So, Kamijou-chan, you should work hard, too!”

“...*She’s* number three? She’s the kind of girl who kicks vending machines!”

“? Kamijou-chan, are you acquainted with Misaka-san?”

“Not really. Well, going back to the topic, seeing some TV show like that and saying ‘Look at that high schooler: they have the same age as you, but look how active that person is! Compared to that, look at yourself, don’t you think you’re worthless?’ I’m not the kind of person that gets motivated by those kind of speeches! Arrrggghhh...”

“Don’t go ‘arrrggghhh’ on me! That troubles me!”

“Okay? Then why do you look so happy when you’re troubled?”

“Eh, ah...well, that’s...You see, it’s because your teacher...She loves—”

“Buowahh!”

“—teaching.”

“...Oh. Okay, teaching. Ah, that scared me... Oh, wait! Come on! I had just let the conversation go a different way, and then it immediately gets put back on the path again!”

“Ahaha. You are a hundred years too early to fight me with words. Now, Kamijou-chan, open up your textbook to page 182 and read about the Psychometer’s mind-protection power used in criminal investigation.”

Like this, today’s tutoring time went by.

Part 2

And thus, the day's extra lessons ended.

It was 6:40 PM. Kamijou had missed the last train that left at the time all students were supposed to have left school, so he was leisurely walking through a shopping district. In order to prevent students from spending all night out, the last trains and buses in Academy City all left at 6:30 PM. The idea was that people would not go out late at night if the transportation system was stopped.

(I'm not sure if I should be glad it's only one more day or be complaining that there's still another day. At any rate, this has gone on way too long. Dammit. Once it's all over, I'm going to the beach!)

Kamijou thought to himself as he returned home that evening. It didn't look like the wind was blowing, but the blades of the wind turbines were definitely turning.

"Mh?"

Kamijou spotted a familiar-looking back amid the crowd. It belonged to a brown-haired girl wearing a Tokiwadai Middle School summer uniform. It was Misaka Mikoto.

Kamijou had no real reason to avoid her, so he jogged a bit to catch up with her.

"Hey. Are you on the way home from some extra lessons, too?"

"Ahn?" was Mikoto's unfeminine response. "Oh, it's you. I'm pretty tired and I want to preserve the strength I have left, so don't make me zap you. So what do you want?"

"Nothing really. We just happened to be on the same road, so I just thought we could walk together."

"Oh?" Mikoto's eyes narrowed a bit. "You 'just thought' you could walk with a Tokiwadai lady? Heh. Do you have any idea how much effort guys put into taking that position?"

"...It's pretty bad to be referring to yourself as a 'Tokiwadai lady'."

"I was joking, you idiot." Mikoto stuck her tongue out a bit. "What you learn at your school is more important than where you go to school, anyway. I'm sure you're old enough to know at least that much."

"Hmm. Well, everyone has their own field they specialize in. By the way, is your little sister not with you? I wanted to thank her for carrying the drinks yesterday."

Mikoto's eyebrows twitched slightly.

It was only a few millimeters, but those few millimeters seemed odd to Kamijou.

"My little sister...? Did you meet her after that?"

"Yeah..."

(Crap.)

Kamijou recalled that Mikoto had grabbed Misaka Imouto's hand and forcibly pulled her away from him. Should he have kept it a secret that they met after that?

Mikoto narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Are you that interested in that little sister?"

"No. I just wanted to thank her for carrying the drinks yester-..."

"So you choose the little sister despite us being visually identical? Or can you not choose and you want both of us together?"

"I said no! Where the hell did you get that kind of knowledge!!"

Kamijou and Mikoto walked along a main street continuing their argument in that vein.

Many different wind turbines stood along the street. Kamijou looked up at the spinning blades and then noticed a blimp floating in the evening sky. The exhibition screen on the side was displaying the day's news. Apparently, three research facilities related to muscular dystrophy had been evacuated over a two week period and there was concern over the intense cold coming to the entire city.

The conversation trailed off because Kamijou's focus turned to the blimp. A blimp may sound old-fashioned, but it used solar power to heat carbon dioxide with a heater for lift and to spin a large motor for thrust, so it was an ecological craft that did not need fuel.

Because of the effort that must have gone into developing the thing, Kamijou wondered if the world's supply of oil was about to run out. The concept didn't particularly bother him.

"I hate that blimp," Mikoto muttered.

"Ahn? Why?" Kamijou asked as he looked back up toward the blimp. He was pretty sure he had heard that the blimps had been sent out because Academy City's board of directors had said the students needed to be more aware of current events.

"...Because people follow the policies decided on by a machine," said Mikoto quietly in response as if she were spitting out something that annoyed her greatly.

Kamijou turned his gaze back to Mikoto in surprise. There was nothing odd about her face. There was nothing odd at all. It was as if a crumbling clay mask had been remade while he wasn't looking.

"What's with you? What's that thing called? Um...Tree Diagram, was it? Hah, are you the kind of person that can't stand it when a machine beats a human at chess?"

Simply put, Tree Diagram was the world's smartest super computer. It was the ultimate simulator created under the pretext of being a perfect weather forecaster.

Weather forecasting may sound familiar, but that was a field where things could only be forecasted. They could not be declared as fact. Because the movements of each of the air particles that created "weather" were incredibly complex and intertwined with the butterfly effect and chaos theory, one could say that there was an 80% chance of rain the next day, but one could not say that it would definitely rain at 9:10:00 AM. That started to enter into the realm of quantum mechanics.

However, Tree Diagram had moved weather forecasting to weather predicting.

It did not do anything complicated. Basically, if it could perfectly predict the movements of every particle in the air around the world, there was only one answer it could come up with.

Tree Diagram had ridiculous enough specs to do that, but some people theorized that its use for weather forecasting was just a front and it actually had some other true use.

Incidentally, there was one irregular aspect of Tree Diagram's weather forecasts.

It calculated the weather forecast for an entire month all at once.

There was no real problem with that because it was still accurate, but it still seemed like unnecessary effort. After all, next month's weather was much, much more likely to be off than tomorrow's weather. If the goal was accurate weather forecasts, it would be better to redo the calculations each day.

Yet the Tree Diagram used the more difficult method.

It was rumored that the leftover time was used for research simulations.

Drug reactions, physiological reactions, electrical reactions, and all sorts of other things could be calculated by Tree Diagram and a couple of tests could confirm the answer given. Being able to create a new drug like that almost sounded crazy. According to the rumor, there were researchers that did not know how to use a test tube and who did not like touching lab rats.

A super computer with that much power had plenty of enemies. Human supremacists who hated machines could try to blow it up in a terrorist attack at any time and AI supremacists who hated people might try to sneak into the storage area for Tree Diagram to steal the technology.

In order to protect it from external enemies, Tree Diagram was currently kept in a place where human hands could not reach it.

Basically, the satellite launched by Academy City was Tree Diagram.

The fact that Academy City could privately use the kind of rocket technology that was usually only allowed by national agencies showed just how much influence Academy City had on the world.

(Well, the fact they allowed it also shows how valuable it was.)

Kamijou stared blankly up at the evening sky. Tree Diagram was orbiting outside the atmosphere even then and it was possible it would continue calculating even if the world ended.

"It's a steel brain watching down on mankind from above, but it can't turn on us or anything. This isn't some cheap science fiction movie. It's just like a bank ATM. It operates according to the buttons you press."

No matter how powerful a supercomputer it was, Tree Diagram could only operate based on the commands people gave it. It was the same as how ATMs did not ruin people's lives because machines were revolting. They did it because they were not being used properly.

"..."

Mikoto did not respond and looked up into the evening sky again. Kamijou couldn't tell if she was looking at the blimp or if her gaze went even further into the distance than that.

"Tree Diagram...The world's most powerful super computer that was launched aboard Academy City's satellite, Orihime I, in order to analyze weather data. It has been determined that no one else will catch up to its level in another 25 years," Mikoto muttered almost under her breath as if she were reading from an Academy City pamphlet. "They say that, but does such a ridiculous absolute simulator really exist?"

"Hah?"

Kamijou looked back toward Mikoto's face, but...

“Just kidding! Ah, I think I started to become a poet or something. Ah ha ha ha ha!!”

Mikoto suddenly chopped Kamijou for no reason.

Standing before him was indeed the lively, smart-assed, and selfish Misaka Mikoto.

“Ow! What the hell was that for!?”

“You really don’t have any dreams, do you? Doesn’t a friendship drama between a human and a high-level sci-fi computer with a human heart sound like it would have some romance to it!?”

“Listen, dammit...”

“Or what about a maid battle robot?”

“I said listen! And there’s no romance or any kind of friendship drama-like stuff to that thing! And are you really a ‘lady’!? I thought a lady read romance novels with a cup of tea in hand!?”

“Hahn? Stop that, please. What age is that idol of an image from? I’m human too, so I read manga at the convenience store every Monday and Wednesday.”

“Buy it! That’s just being a nuisance!”

“Well, I have to go this way,” Mikoto said ignoring Kamijou’s yell.

Mikoto’s spirits had been changing from instant to instant, but she then left. Kamijou blankly watched her leave with a puzzled look on his face.

“...I don’t understand her. Is this what you call the characteristics of puberty? Or does she just hate me?”

Part 3

But in that case, he couldn’t make sense of the scene before him.

(...That’s Mikoto, isn’t it? What’s she doing?)

After heading down the road a bit after Mikoto left, he saw Mikoto crouching by the side of the road. She was next to a cardboard box sitting at the base of a wind turbine. Just as Kamijou’s brain sent out warning signals because the scene was familiar, he saw a black cat sticking up from the cardboard box.

Mikoto was trying to feed the cat by bringing a sweet bun close to it, but the frightened cat pressed its ears back on its head and balled up as if someone were swinging his fist down toward it.

(??? Does she hate me so much that she purposefully went down that other road to get away from me? But then why is she ahead of me now? Why would she circle around ahead of me?)

Kamijou's head was full of questions, but then he noticed something. At Mikoto's feet as she crouched was a pair of NV goggles.

That wasn't Mikoto. That was Misaka Imouto who looked just like her.

"...Without the goggles, you really can't tell them apart," Kamijou muttered.

Misaka Imouto suddenly stopped moving while staring emotionlessly at the black cat. Without saying a word, she turned just her head like a lighthouse to look at Kamijou.

"Hey. Thanks for carrying those drinks and taking care of those fleas yesterday."

"...Misaka did not do that in order to be thanked, says Misaka as she responds."

A slight bit of annoyance was mixed in with her expressionlessness as Misaka Imouto took the goggles from the ground and put them on her forehead. She also drew in the hand holding the sweet bun.

"Misaka only removed her goggles because she had heard that cats hated shining things like lenses, says Misaka as she explains. Should she apologize for making you mistake her for Onee-sama?"

As she spoke, Misaka Imouto for some reason expressionlessly hid the sweet bun behind her back.

Despite having been frightened before, the black cat was mewing in dissatisfaction.

Kamijou looked puzzled.

"If I needed an apology for something like that, I think I'd end up asking everyone in the world for an apology." Kamijou sighed. "But if the cat hates lenses, why did you put the goggles back on? Did you want to maintain a sense of individuality?"

It was hard to tell because of her lack of any expression and the calm with which she acted, but for some Kamijou felt like she had frantically put the goggles back on once she knew someone was looking.

"...No, not really, says Misaka as she answers your question."

She replied immediately, but her words were somehow vague.

Kamijou looked puzzled once more. It was true that taking off her goggles to not scare a cat on the road side and crouching down while holding out a sweet bun for it seemed out of character for the expressionless and emotionless Misaka Imouto, but there was no real reason to hide it.

"Then you can just give the sweet bun to the cat. It likes it, right?"

"No...That is not it." Misaka Imouto froze. "Either way, it is impossible for Misaka to feed this cat, says Misaka as she makes a conclusion. Misaka has a fatal defect, says Misaka in an additional explanation."

"A defect? Don't say it like that."

"No, it is the appropriate term. Misaka's body is constantly forming a weak magnetic field, says Misaka while continuing. The human body cannot detect it, but it seems other animals can."

"???"

"It is said that the strange movements of animals that act as an omen of an earthquake are the animals' reactions to changes in the earth's magnetic field caused by changes in the earth's crust, says Misaka giving an easy-to-understand example."

"...Hm. The animals don't like it and run away, right? So does your magnetic field make animals hate you, Misaka Imouto?"

Misaka Imouto looked ever so slightly annoyed.

"They do not hate Misaka. They merely have a slight dislike of her, says Misaka correcting you."

"..."

Kamijou felt a little sorry for her, so he decided against joking around anymore. Animals didn't like Misaka Imouto just because of the magnetic field emitted from her body and she stared at the frightened cat with expressionless eyes. Kamijou felt bad for interrupting her, so he decided to leave.

"Wait, says Misaka requesting that you stop."

"Oh! You sensed that just from my presence!"

“Listen. There is a black cat here, says Misaka as she points toward the cardboard box. How can you leave without giving anything to this hungry cat? asks Misaka?”

“...Why do I have to give the cat some food just because you’ve grown fond of it!? And you’re the one with a sweet bun in your hand!”

“No, not that. There is an abandoned cat here, so why did you not think of taking it in? asks Misaka a second time. Do you know how animals are treated when they are taken in by the health centers? asks Misaka as an example. First they put the animal within a clear polycarbonate case and inject twenty milliliters of a nerve gas called ASD10 inside...”

“Wahh!” Kamijou yelled cutting off Misaka Imouto’s words.

Hearing that while the frightened black cat looked him in the eye was incredibly awkward.

“You take it in! You found it and you’re the one that was feeding it!”

“...It is impossible for Misaka to raise this cat, says Misaka as she honestly replies. Misaka lives in an environment that is slightly different from yours, says Misaka giving a reason.”

Kamijou guessed that her dorm’s rules must be pretty strict, but then he recalled that his own dorm’s rules did not allow pets. Kamijou was the type who had no intention of following rules he couldn’t see the reason behind, so it seemed odd to him that Misaka Imouto would give up on the cat for a reason like that.

Misaka Imouto crouched down and simply stared the black cat in the eye.

Her expressionless eyes followed the black cat despite knowing that it would never take a liking to her.

“...Ahh.”

Kamijou stood still.

He had been worried about this when he had taken in the first cat. He had been worried that one cat would lead to taking in a second and the second would lead to third and a fourth. Of course, Kamijou’s finances were not well off enough to create an animal kingdom.

Kamijou wanted to refuse the black cat, but he had a feeling Misaka Imouto would stay there all night staring at the cat and then get into a fight with the people from the health center if he left the cat there.

“D-dammit! This is just like with that calico cat!!”

“Misaka does not understand what you are saying, but are you intending to take in this black cat? asks Misaka. If you do not take it in, the health center workers will-...”

“Yes, I get it, I get. Quit staring up at me with those expressionless eyes and talking about the health center!”

(You and I certainly do live lives of misfortune, don’t we?)

As Kamijou addressed the frightened cat in his mind, he picked it up from the cardboard box.

“That’s right! A name! This is your cat, so take responsibility and give it a name!”

“...It is Misaka’s?”

“Yeah, it’s yours.”

Kamijou looked down at the cat in his arms and the cat timidly returned his gaze. Misaka Imouto looked up at the evening sky for a bit with her usual expressionless face.

“Dog.”

“Hah?”

“Misaka is naming this black cat Dog. ...Dog even though it is a cat. Heh heh.”

Misaka Imouto’s expression was that of someone remembering a funny joke, but it looked a bit scary.

“...No, um...Please give it a more serious and dignified name that fits the type of animal it is.”

“Then Tokugawa Ieyasu, says Misaka after reconsidering.”

“That’s too dignified! Wait, are you the kind of character that pretends to think about things but doesn’t think at all!”

“Then what about Schrödinger?”

“Hell no! Even if it was just an example, some professor who would happily come up with a story about sticking a cat in a box and spraying poison gas inside couldn’t have liked cats!”

In the end, they decided to name the cat later. However, Kamijou had a bad feeling that they would be unable to agree on a name later either and she would end up literally nicknaming the cat “Later”.

Part 4

The orange sky had turned to purple.

Kamijou walked along a main road while looking down at the black cat in his arms.

If they were really going to raise an animal, they needed to know how.

(Well, I know how to well enough. Index on the other hand...)

Kamijou sighed as he walked along the street as it started to look more like night. If it was just a cruel prank, you just had to get rid of that cruelty, but Index was acting completely out of the goodness of her heart, so doing that would have the reverse effect. As she was doing it out of the goodness of her heart, she would feel it was the right thing to do and would not hesitate to continue. If he didn't hurry to a bookstore and buy a book on raising cats, that smiling pure-white nun might end up with the nickname Death End.

"This is a different route from yesterday, says Misaka as she points that out," Misaka Imouto said while walking next to him.

Every time she glanced over at the black cat in Kamijou's arms, she looked like she was barely holding herself back. It seemed she really, really wanted to pet the cat, but she was giving its feelings of dislike toward her magnetic field priority and holding back.

"Oh, I'm just dropping by somewhere on the way home. There's a book I kind of want."

"Are you headed for a bookstore? asks Misaka. Geographically, taking a right at that last intersection would have been the shortest route, says Misaka as she turns around."

"No, I don't want a new book. I'm headed to that used bookstore up ahead. How you raise a cat doesn't change. Only 100 yen a book is ideal."

Kamijou had no way of knowing, but knowledge and information related to living beings would change from time to time. Let's use baseball training as an example. A ten year old book would tell someone to throw and throw and just use some guts to bear with the pain in order to pitch faster. However, that person would actually destroy their shoulder if they did that.

"Do you want a book on raising a cat? asks Misaka to make sure."

"It's not so much the book but the knowledge within. You saw those girls in the nun's habit and the shrine maiden outfit, right?"

"..." Misaka Imouto looked at Kamijou's face with her emotionless eyes. "To repeat, carelessly handling a cat's life falls under the crime of property damage, says Misaka as she makes a warning."

"Ah...Eh? What, are you mad?"

"Misaka is not angry. This is not a situation where everything is fine as long as you are not directly involved, cautions Misaka. If you leave those two alone knowing what they will do, you are responsible as well, says Misaka giving her objective opinion."

"...Sorry. Are you mad, Misaka Imouto?"

"Misaka is not angry. And not everything is okay just because it is not legally restricted, says Misaka as she admonishes you. Just think using common sense and..."

"Ah, I've had enough of this." Kamijou said as if it were a type of magic spell. "But don't worry. Index and Himegami were only doing that because they thought it would be good for the cat. They won't do anything clearly bad for the cat like beating or abusing it."

"From what Misaka saw yesterday, that statement has close to zero credibility, responds Misaka. And how do you plan to deal with the situation if the book has incorrect information in it? Misaka knows how to deal with cats, so you should get her advice on how to-..."

"Ahhh!" Kamijou didn't let her finish. "I said not to worry! Index and Himegami were only doing what they thought was good for the cat! They won't do anything clearly bad for the cat! Like beating it! Or abusing it!"

"...Misaka thinks you are just saying the same thing again verbatim just with more energy behind it, says Misaka expressing her thoughts. That is not Misaka's main point. She is saying that you should get her to-..."

"Abhah!" Kamijou became completely nonsensical. "Bi said bot to borry! Bindex and Bimegami were bonly doing what they bhought was bood bor the bat! Bey won't bo anything blearly bad bor the bat! Bike beating bit! Bor abusing bit!"

"...(anger)"

"Pant pant...! Ah, here's the bookstore."

They were standing in front of a large used bookstore that belonged to a chain. Kamijou looked down at the black cat in his arms and thought for a bit.

"Mh. Come to think of it, I'm probably not supposed to enter the store holding a cat."

"...That was an extremely expository statement, but please do not leave it with Misaka, says Misaka in a preemptive denial."

"...Because your magnetic field will make the cat dislike you? Well, if you can overcome that obstacle, true friendship will blossom. Take this! Ultimate Cat Bomb!"

Kamijou lightly tossed the cat toward Misaka Imouto who was standing next him (on the assumption she would catch it). Of course, it was clear the cat's reflexes would allow it to land nicely even if no one caught it. However, Misaka Imouto reflexively reached out for it (just as Kamijou had predicted). It was the sad habit of one who loved animals.

Misaka Imouto was about to complain, but Kamijou had already entered the used bookstore.

"...Really. What is wrong with him to think it is okay to throw a kitten? asks Misaka as she mutters to herself."

Misaka Imouto was now alone on a twilight-colored street of Academy City.

The black cat reacted to the electromagnetic waves emitted by her body and looked up to her with trembling eyes. She thought of lowering the cat to the ground, but it had not yet recognized Kamijou or her as its owner. If she let go of it there, she had a feeling it would simply run away.

Even if it was only a kitten, there was no way for a human to catch up on foot to a cat that was truly trying to flee. The first thing an owner had to do was to feed the cat and give it a place to sleep, so the cat would feel secure and not feel the need to run away.

"...And yet he threw it, says Misaka with a sigh."

She spoke with a completely expressionless face. Luckily, the cat she was holding did not stick out its claws or struggle. This was more due to cowardice than obedience. It was true that she had wanted to touch the cat, but she sighed again at the fact that resisting was better than seeing it so frightened.

And then she noticed something.

It was summer break, so on that evening in Academy City, the street was filled with boys and girls wearing casual clothes. As Misaka Imouto was wearing a school uniform, she stood out quite a bit.

However, she did not stand out nearly as much as the boy she had spotted.

The boy's hair and skin were dreadfully white. They were white, but they were the opposite of the image of purity white often gave. This white was a very dirty white. That rotten white was accentuated by the fact that his clothes were all black.

And there were his eyes.

Those eyes were red like fresh blood, crimson like burning flames, and scarlet like the depths of hell.

He was amid a distant crowd, but the boy's presence was simply too vivid. The special boy was not doing anything in particular. The exceptional boy really was not doing much of anything.

Yet the mere fact that hellish boy was standing on that peaceful street was abnormal.

He was Accelerator.

He was the strongest Level 5 in Academy City—and perhaps the strongest in the world.

He stared at Misaka Imouto and silently smiled.

"…"

Misaka Imouto silently lowered the black cat to the ground.

It would be killed. If it stayed with her, that black cat would get caught up in the conflict and would be killed. She knew that, but the cat refused to leave her side. As it trembled, it merely looked up at her face mewing.

Accelerator continued to look at Misaka Imouto and smile. That distant white smile was warped, twisted, and perverted. The white was incandescent, dirtied, and insane.

A single image passed through Misaka Imouto's mind.

It was the image of a girl's right arm being torn off late at night due to her Metal Eater exploding.

In that instant, Misaka Imouto's everyday life ended.

In that instant, her hell began.

Part 5

A great number of boys and girls flooded into the air conditioned store.

The chain of used bookstores it belonged to advertised the fact that its prices were cheap and that reading things in the store was okay. Most of the people in the store were there because they wanted to read a certain manga but not enough to buy it.

"…"

Kamijou stood blankly amid it all.

There was indeed a book called “How to Raise Cats” on the bookshelf in front of him. The spine of the book was faded and it was cheaper because of it, so he had no complaints there.

But Kamijou couldn’t get over the fact that a book titled “How to Cook Delicious Beef” was in the shelf right next to “How to Raise Cats”.

“...Well, it is true that both books are about animals I guess.”

When he moved his gaze even further to the side he spotted a book called “New! The Scientific Cows of the Farm Buildings”.

There were a few buildings in Academy City that had no windows. They were referred to as agriculture buildings and were used to grow hydroponic vegetables and raise animals for meat.

Inside the buildings were vegetables that were bathed in ultraviolet light, breathed carbon dioxide that had been through air purifiers, and spread their roots in water that had all sorts of nutrients mixed in. Apparently people from outside of Academy City found all that to be “creepy”. They seemed to think eating things that were created scientifically was bad for you.

(...It’s the opposite. How can you eat vegetables that were grown in dirt that could have had industrial waste and who knows what else mixed in?)

That difference in values was one of the walls between those within Academy City and those without, but Kamijou simply pulled “How to Raise Cats” from the shelf without thinking on it any further.

♦

A girl ran through an alley that ran behind the used book store.

One of her shoes came off.

The girl felt that running with only one shoe would be difficult, so she pulled off the other one and continued to run.

With her shoulder-length brown hair, short-sleeved white blouse, summer sweater, and pleated skirt, she reminded one of a Tokiwadai Middle School student at first glance. And someone more familiar with a certain Tokiwadai student would be reminded of the name Misaka Mikoto.

However, there were two things that did not match the title of middle school student.

The first was the military goggles on her forehead.

The second was the assault rifle she held in her right hand.

The assault rifle was made of laminated plastic instead of steel. As it was shaped in a functional aesthetic type of way like something one would see on a fighter aircraft, it looked like a toy gun from some kind of SF world. And that appearance was not necessarily wrong.

The rifle, the F2000R Toy Soldier, detected the target with infrared rays and used electronic control to adjust the trajectory in real time to give the bullet the best odds of hitting. The shooter did not have to think about the wind direction or the expected evasion patterns of the target. If one aimed the barrel the way the "thinking machine" told them to, anyone could become an expert marksman. On top of that, it had special rubber wrapped around it to absorb shock and used carbon dioxide to reduce the recoil from firing as much as possible. While the Metal Eater antitank rifle was a monster that only a large adult could wield, the F2000R with its low recoil that was said to not even crack an egg was also a monster in that it could easily be wielded by a second grader.

However, the girl had no way of dealing with her current situation even with that monster in hand.

Her raging pulse, exceedingly irregular breathing, and flickering, chaotic thoughts all clearly showed that she was the one being hunted.

A form approached from behind.

A white boy was heading for her from not even ten meters away.

"Ha ha! What's with those fleeing hips? Why are you shaking your ass like that!? You're just asking for it!!"

That narrow alley was straight and lacking any kind of cover to avoid a bullet with, yet the unarmed "hunter" was overflowing with crazed passion.

Without stopping her flight, the girl twisted her body around to look behind her.

She aimed the barrel of the F2000R at the white boy named Accelerator who seemed to freeze the summer heat.

She did not hesitate to pull the trigger.

The rifle silently absorbed both the shock and the sound of the gunshot, so only the tiniest of an explosive noise left the barrel as if only a cheap firecracker had been set off. Nevertheless, 5.56 mm bullets accurately shot toward the boy's vital points.

Or so she had thought.

"...!?"

The girl's body froze due to shock. The 5.56 mm bullets held the destructive force to fly out the other side if they were shot into the side of a car, but they were repelled in every direction the instant they hit the boy's body. It was as if she had fired a cheap handgun at the front of a tank.

With the sound of flesh being crushed, a red hole had been opened in the girl's right shoulder.

One of the repelled bullet had pierced her shoulder.

"...E...Gh!"

The girl staggered. She immediately reached for the wall, but her legs got tangled together and her head struck the dirty wall. From there, she slid down to the ground.

"C'mon, how about a riddle to kill some time? Here's your question: What is it that the power of Accelerator does!?"

The girl heard a crazed laugh. When she looked up, she saw the boy's leg coming down with all his weight behind it to crush her skull.

"!"

She immediately rolled along the dirty ground and evaded the downward swinging foot. She then held the F2000R up and pulled the trigger.

She fired at what could almost be called pointblank range. The bullet seemed to be absorbed in toward the white boy's eye, but the instant it touched his soft eyeball, it was repelled to the side.

The white boy did not even blink.

His expression changed to a smile that made his dirty-white face look hideously burned.

He swung up his white hand. He swung up that hand that had an unknown effect.

"...!"

The girl immediately threw the F2000R at the boy's face as the rifle was now empty. She did not think that it would act as a fatal blow, but she hoped it would provide an instantaneous opening she could use to escape.

However, the boy did not move even slightly. The instant the rifle struck the boy's face, the F2000R broke to pieces. It was as if the gun had been chomped on by giant invisible fangs.

The girl did not have time to be frozen in shock. She twisted her body and managed to roll a step away from the boy. She swung around her left hand as she could still move that one and gathered power there.

She released a lightning spear from it.

The spear of purple electricity moved forward at the speed of light and held enough destructive force to knock someone unconscious.

She did not think that it would act as a fatal blow.

As long as it distracted him long enough for her to get away, that was enough.

However, the lightning spear she had fired at the boy rebounded and struck her in her own chest.

“Gah...!?”

The girl was knocked back to the ground with a shock that felt like she had been struck in the chest with a hammer. Her breathing stopped and every muscle in her body moved irregularly.

The girl’s trembling lips managed to put together a single word.

“Re...flection...!?”

“Sorry, that’s not entirely wrong, but it still doesn’t get to the essence of what I can do!”

The girl somehow tried to distance herself from the boy, but her body would not do what she told it to due to the electrical attack she herself had fired.

“The answer is vector transformation! Motion, heat, electricity. I can alter any kind of vector that touches my skin. I have it set to reflect by default, though!”

The girl looked up at the boy’s face in shock.

The 2.3 million espers in Academy City were indeed special humans, but not many of them could defeat even a handgun with their power. And if they could defeat a handgun, you would use a machine gun. If they could defeat a machine gun, you would use a tank, a fighter aircraft, a battleship with submarines, or as a last resort, even a nuclear missile.

There were no espers who could defeat something like that. In fact, it would just be a lot easier to buy a handgun rather than controlling the brain and altering the arrangement of genes in order to create a power that could fight against a gun. It just seemed absurd to create a huge esper development institution that slipped past international law in order to create something on the level of a cheap weapon that could be bought in American supermarkets for about thirty thousand yen.

That was why Academy City's goal was not to create espers. The espers were nothing more than a type of litmus paper. It seemed what was truly important was why espers had been born and what mechanism brought them about.

Yet the boy before her eyes was different.

That boy could alter all vectors be they motion, heat, or electricity, so he would not be injured even if he were directly hit by that last resort of a nuclear missile. He would just reflect the shockwave that would blow everything way, the heat that would scorch everything, and the neutrons and radiation that would kill everything.

He was Accelerator, Academy City's strongest Level 5.

The word "monster" came to the girl's mind. The creature before her eyes that had a human form held the power to singlehandedly make an enemy of the entire world and survive.

The boy crouched down next to the girl.

"My Level 5 power lets me control every kind of vector." That boy seemed so different, but he spoke as if it was nothing. "If I use it, I can even do this."

The boy stuck his slender index finger into the dark-red hole in the girl's right shoulder. It was like the action of a child squashing a bug on the road.

"...!!"

There was a sound like a red fruit being squished and the girl's body stiffened in intense pain.

"Now, it's time for the question for the consolation round," Accelerator said mockingly. "I'm touching your blood. I'm touching the flow of your blood. Now, if I reverse that vector...If I reverse the vector of your blood, what will happen to your body? A correct answer gets you a nice peaceful sleep!"

A blank expression appeared on the girl's face as if she did not understand what was going on.

An instant later, unimaginable pain assaulted her entire body.

♦

"Huh?" Kamijou said upon leaving the used bookstore with a paper bag in one hand.

Misaka Imouto was nowhere to be found.

(Maybe she got mad that I forced her to take the cat, so she left.)

The cat alone was sitting there on the ground.

Kamijou picked up the cat as it laid its ears back and trembled a bit. He looked around the area again, but everything about the street tinted in the colors of twilight seemed normal. A lot of boys and girls wearing private clothes were walking along the street as they returned to their dorms after an exhausting day of fun.

(...?)

As Kamijou casually looked around, he felt something from that normal scenery. He spun back around and looked at the alley between the used book store and the multi-tenant building next to it. Something about it drew his attention.

(What is it? What's wrong with that alley?)

Kamijou looked closer. A tile walkway headed along in front of the entrance to the alley and a wind turbine spun nearby. The entrance must not have gotten cleaned often because quite a few leaves and a single girl's shoe were gathered there. The tiling of the pathway ended right at the alley entrance and the ground in the alley was made of incredibly makeshift-looking asphalt.

...A single girl's shoe?

"...?"

Still holding the black cat, Kamijou approached the entrance to the alley. A bad feeling crawled up within him like a centipede. There was definitely just one girl's shoe there. It was a small brown loafer that looked like something that would be required by a school. The shoe was clean and had no dirt on it, so it couldn't have been there for long.

Kamijou stared into the alley.

The sun was already sinking below the horizon, so its light did not reach the gap between the buildings. The darkness made it look like the entrance to a cave and he could not see anything within by just peering in.

"..."

Kamijou took one step into the alley.

With that one step, it felt as if the temperature had lowered two or three degrees. A feeling of having stepped into some unknown place slowly rose from his foot up to his body.

Kamijou continued on. There he found the other shoe lying on the dirty ground of the alley. He continued further on. The bad feeling grew. He tried to keep his pace slow, but

his legs continued to accelerate. Kamijou didn't even know why he was hurrying, but his breathing and pulse were picking up pace as if they were falling down a hill.

Then Kamijou realized there were marks like part of the wall had been scraped off. It was as if someone had scraped along the concrete with a metal stake. And it was not just one or two marks. Both walls were covered with those marks like someone had been recklessly swinging a metal rod about.

Kamijou stepped on something.

It was a metal similar in color to gold...or more accurately, copper. It was a metal cylinder about the size of a battery. Kamijou thought it looked like the empty ammunition cartridges he had only ever seen in movies. There was a faint smell of smoke remaining as if someone had shot off a firework.

(What...?)

Kamijou almost spoke out subconsciously, but he suppressed it. For some reason, he tried to walk silently as he headed further in. With each step, he felt like the air was getting dirtier.

As he continued on, he saw something lying on the ground further ahead in the darkness. No, it was someone collapsed on the ground. He could see the legs from where he was. He could see two legs, but he could not see the upper half of the body as if it had been eaten by the darkness. Something was scattered around about the legs. It was plastic-looking shards and springs. It was almost like the remains of some sort of toy.

"Misaka...?"

Kamijou did not know why her name came out first. He headed closer as if he were cutting through the darkness obscuring his view.

And there she was.

Misaka Imouto's corpse was lying on the ground.

Part 6

She was lying face up as if she were staring up at the rectangular visible portion of the purple sky.

There was a sea of blood. The sea of blood was so large that it made one wonder if a single human body really held that much blood. It wasn't just on the ground. Both walls

were painted red up to eye-level. It looked like someone had wrung out a human body to get every last drop of blood out.

In the center of that explosion of red lay a girl.

The arms and legs extending out from the short-sleeves and the skirt were torn up. It was most likely the same on her skin within her clothes that he could not see. Her school uniform had been dyed so red that its original colors could no longer be seen, but the clothes themselves were not torn at all.

Her body seemed to have been torn apart from the inside along the paths of the blood vessels as if someone had passed narrow wires through all of them and then forcibly torn the wires out. Her torn-up arms were reminiscent of a diagram of a dissected frog. The torn-up girl had nothing that could actually be called a “face”. Instead, she had what looked like an open flower or a peeled boiled egg. It was a dark-red cavity with pink muscles and soft yellow fat inside.

“Uuh...Ahh...”

Upon seeing the red and purple scene before him, Kamijou took a step back. He must have started squeezing with his arms because the black cat started mewing like it could not breathe.

“Ah...Gh...”

Kamijou had seen a type of hell within the Misawa Cram School, but the corpses he had seen there had not had a “flesh-and-blood” feeling to them because they had either been encased in armor or transformed into melted gold.

But this was different.

He felt the urge to vomit as if he had stuck a finger down his throat. He screamed in his heart not to vomit. He used nice logic in thinking that he was looking at Misaka Imouto and he shouldn’t vomit upon seeing her, but then he suddenly noticed her skirt in the edge of his vision.

Something was sticking out from within her skirt, from between her legs.

The soft and squishy object with a pink surface and a hint of purple was...

“Ugehh!”

In that instant, Kamijou could no longer hold back and his body doubled over. A sour flavor filled his mouth and then the contents of his stomach shot from his mouth.

Kamijou vomited.

He was looking at the person who he had been smiling and speaking with just ten minutes before. That strange truth felt like it was going to blow away the gears turning in his head.

With a disgusting sound, the vomit fell to the ground. It spread out and mixed with the edge of the sea of blood creating an odd marble pattern.

Blood.

Finally, Kamijou realized that the blood had not dried at all. Blood took about fifteen minutes to coagulate, so the person who had done that to her may still have been nearby.

The person who had done that to her.

Kamijou paled at his own thoughts. It clearly did not look like an accident or a suicide. He started to feel dizzy. The only other possibility was something he did not want to think about.

And then he heard a noise further down the alley.

"!?"

Ordinarily, one would assume it was a stray cat or something, but the sea of blood had already sent the situation beyond the ordinary. Kamijou's legs naturally brought him back. Something scary was ahead in the darkness, but even more, he simply could not even think about stepping over Misaka Imouto.

Kamijou took a few steps back and then noticed something hard in his pocket. It was his cell phone. He thought about calling for help, but he also thought the danger would come before help could arrive. Even if he called for help, he had to get out of there first, so he turned his back on Misaka Imouto and ran back through the alley.

The alley was completely straight, but the ground felt like it was shaking and he kept running into the walls. As he ran, he hit the buttons of his cell phone, but his fingers were trembling so much he didn't know what buttons he was hitting. It might have been 110, it might have been 119, or it might have been 117 or 177. At any rate, he pressed them. He heard it ring a few times and then he heard a slight click.

(It finally connected!)

Just when Kamijou got excited, he started hearing a cold electronic dial tone.

Kamijou removed the cell phone from his ear and looked at the screen.

It said it had no signal. He felt like throwing the phone against the wall.

(Cell phones are surprisingly inconvenient.)

He had tried to use the cell phone to call for help, but it didn't get a signal in that narrow alleyway. He had no choice, so he left the alley and dialed 119 again in front of the used book store.

He wasn't even sure what he said.

He had merely yelled something that didn't explain the situation at all and the rare number of 119 was contained within his call history.

Normal life continued on that main street and Kamijou doubted anyone would believe him if he told them a girl's destroyed corpse lay inside that alley.

"..."

Kamijou lowered his gaze to the cell phone in his hand.

He should probably let Mikoto know what had happened, but he didn't know her number. Not even being able to do that left Kamijou feeling incredibly powerless.

♦

The cat within Kamijou's hands yawned.

He had called 119, but it was the police who had come.

His internal clock was not working properly, so he had no idea how much time had passed since he had called. He had a feeling it had been more than an hour, but he also had a feeling it had only been ten seconds.

Looking at his phone, it had apparently been half an hour.

At first, Kamijou had thought his phone was broken, but he looked up and saw that the purple of evening had changed to the blue of night. He stared blankly up at the shining stars.

"..."

Kamijou silently watched the police who had arrived.

However, they were technically Anti-Skill not police. They were not espers. They were something like soldiers armed with next-generation weapons. They must have been thinking that it was possible it had been a murder committed by an out-of-control esper because a windowless station wagon pulled up and around ten Anti-Skill members got out. They wore black helmets and suits made of special fibers which made them look a bit like some kind of robot. They also held a strange kind of rifle in their hands. Their equipment seemed to boast that they were putting priority on capturing the criminal rather than on protecting the civilians.

"...Hey! Hey, you!"

As Kamijou stared at them blankly, one of the Anti-Skill members suddenly called out to him. He was confused at first. He had only called, so they should not have known what he looked like. But then he noticed that they were calling out to all the people in the area.

"Oh, I was the one that called in. But I was calling for an ambulance not the police."

"I see. The police are contacted as a matter of course in issues like this. We probably just arrived first." The Anti-Skill man looked at Kamijou. "Is that the alley? And it would help if you could explain what you saw in there."

Kamijou closed his eyes.

It felt like the scene he had witnessed in that back alley was stuck to the underside of his eyelids.

"...A person was dead," he said.

It irritated him that his own voice was surprisingly calm.

"It was like her body had been torn up. ...I don't know what kind of weapon was used. It might have been some kind of power."

Something swelled up within him with each word he spoke.

It was an unpleasant feeling like all his paralyzed senses were returning.

"She was an acquaintance of mine. I only met her two days ago, but I know what she looks like well enough to identify her from a photo. Ah, no. Why am I so calm? My thoughts should be more scattered, so why am I so...!"

"That's enough," said the man shaking his head. "I'm sure you made the best choice. That's why we are here. You were able to do something."

"...But I ran away."

"You still did something to help," the Anti-Skill man said.

Kamijou knew that the man was only saying that to console him, but it still managed to hold him in check. Kamijou just barely managed to stop before he reached definite destruction.

"We normally like to bring the person who discovered the crime scene along with us, but what will you do? We won't force you."

A chill ran down Kamijou's back. That scene of blood, flesh, and guts was stuck on the underside of his eyelids and his fingertips seemed to go numb.

Yet...

"...I'll go," Kamijou said slowly as he held the cat.

He didn't know why, but he did not want to run away anymore.

♦

As he thought about seeing it again, Kamijou's body started to tremble. He trembled, but he had to go back into that alley. What had happened in the darkness there? He had to find out.

Kamijou led the way into the back alley as the armed Anti-Skill group acted as a shield for him.

(...Huh?)

However, something seemed off the instant he stepped into the alley.

The shoe was gone.

When he had first entered the alley, he had seen a girl's loafer lying in the entrance. And there had been another shoe a bit further into the alley.

Kamijou spun around.

The shoe at the entrance was definitely there.

However, the *other shoe that was supposed to be further into the alley was gone.*

(...?)

Kamijou felt something heavy within his gut, but the Anti-Skill group continued on. Next, they should have come across the scrapes on the wall and the empty cartridges. Yes, they *should* have. However, the cartridges were gone. As if someone had cleaned up the alley, not a single one could be found on the dirty ground. The scrapes on the wall had been scraped off. The scrapes themselves couldn't be erased, but it looked like someone had desperately tried to hide them by making their source impossible to identify.

(...Wait a second.)

Kamijou had a bad feeling. He felt a pressure in his stomach. He wanted to stop and think for a second, but the Anti-Skill group continued on. He felt as if bugs were crawling about under his skin. The missing shoe, the missing cartridges, and the obscured scrapes on the wall. Those words seemed all over the place, but they seemed to lead toward a single meaning as if their combination created some kind of chemical reaction.

Kamijou wanted to stand still, but he could not. As if he were being dragged by an invisible rope attached to the Anti-Skill group, he headed forward.

And they finally arrived.

Kamijou's breathing stopped.

They had arrived at the murder scene where Misaka Imouto had been lying dead in a pool of blood.

However, the corpse was nowhere to be found.

Part 7

It wasn't just the body.

The red blood that had been covering the ground as well as both walls was as cleanly gone as a stain that had been wiped off of some glass. None of the flesh or hair that had been scattered about remained. The area did not even smell like blood. The stink of flesh was gone as well. It was as if there had never been a body there and thus nothing had occurred there at all.

"Eh?"

At first, Kamijou only let out that surprised voice.

He stood in place and the Anti-Skill group ahead of him turned around.

"What is it? Did you notice something?"

"No, it's not that." Kamijou pointed toward the ground. "It was here. This is where the body was. And where it should still be."

"What?"

The Anti-Skill members looked at the ground, but there was not a single drop of blood much less a body there. There weren't even any damp traces of something having been wiped away.

The Anti-Skill members exchanged glances. An unpleasant atmosphere hung in the air. Some of their shoulders relaxed and some were clearly staring at Kamijou.

"Wait a second! There really was a dead body here!"

"Okay," one of them said while looking at Kamijou. "Even if you really did see what you think you did, are you sure it was here? Your memories could be a bit confused and you mistook this for the actual place."

His words were kind, but they had no seriousness to them like a soda that had lost its carbonation. Kamijou heard the words as those used to pacify an unmanageable drunk.

He was at a loss for words because he couldn't figure out what had happened.

Had it really all been an illusion? If it had been an illusion, then why had Misaka Imouto disappeared from in front of the used bookstore? Kamijou pulled out his cell phone. The quickest way to figure out if it had been an illusion or reality would be to contact Misaka Imouto. If the phone connected, he would know she was alive.

However, Kamijou did not know Misaka Imouto's cell phone number.

As he could not even make a simple phone call, the only thing left was to try to figure it out on his own.

"..."

Kamijou was frozen in that spot.

The scene before his eyes seemed so ordinary that he started to doubt his own memories. And *Kamijou was actually glad to doubt his memories*. If he had been seeing some sort of illusion, then his report to the police would have been nothing but nonsense. Misaka Imouto would be walking around in some completely different place and would appear before him after remembering about the cat. That future was clearly the more desirable one.

(...Dammit. What is going on?)

He would prefer it if Misaka Imouto was not dead, but he hesitated to just write off the reality he had seen as an illusion. That odd contradiction ate into his heart.

"What the hell is going on!?"

Kamijou could not stand it any longer, so he pushed past the Anti-Skill group and ran further into the alley. He heard a voice calling out telling him to stop, but he doubted they would come after him. Those Anti-Skill members were probably thinking he had called in that report as a prank.

The black cat in his arms mewed.

Kamijou ran along the narrow alleyway, but he had no idea what he was searching for. He knew he was searching for something, but he had no idea what that something was. It may have looked like he was just running to get rid of the strange gloom that had come over him.

As he continued to run down the dark and rotten back alley, he approached a T-intersection. The path split off to the right and left. The right path was a narrow path continuing into the darkness, but he could see the glow of streetlights coming from the left path. Most likely, it connected to a main street. It looked a bit like the exit of a tunnel.

Emotionally, Kamijou wanted to head for the exit to the left.

However, leaving that back alley felt like giving up, so Kamijou headed for the darkness to the right.

That part of the alley was a little wider than before so the word “path” fit it better than “gap”. Because of the extra space, polyethylene buckets, unused bicycles, and other items were scattered about. A tipped over case of beer bottles, a cardboard box that seemed to have soaked up water, and other sources of liquid led to all sorts of liquids flowing across the ground, mixing together, and forming a sticky liquid.

Footprints could be seen in that sticky liquid leading further down the path.

Kamijou followed the footprints with his eyes and stared into the darkness. He heard something moving in that darkness.

Someone was there.

He thought his heart would be crushed by the shock.

The cat struggled in pain. He may nervously have started squeezing it in his hands again.

“Who’s there!?” Kamijou yelled.

The person in the darkness turned around in response to his voice.

Surprisingly, the person was shorter than Kamijou and appeared to be a girl. However, the body bag-like object she was carrying over her shoulder was quite ominous indeed. Yes, it was a body bag, a bag used to contain a human who was at least unconscious. The body bag was bent into an upside down V-shape over the person's shoulder and Kamijou felt like he could see a limp girl's silhouette in it.

(What is that...?)

That silhouette left Kamijou speechless. It looked less like a living human was stuffed inside and more like the parts of a dismantled mannequin had been thrown inside. While the overall silhouette was collapsed, what were clearly wrists, ankles, and other body parts could be seen pressing against the fabric from the inside.

And then Kamijou saw.

He saw the person who he had not been able to see properly due to the darkness. He saw the person holding the body bag that clearly had a person stuffed inside.

Kamijou saw her.

With the darkness cleared away, he saw the person standing there.

It was Misaka Imouto.

"Wha-...?"

Kamijou froze up in front of that ridiculous sight. The friendly mew the black cat in his arms gave seemed strange.

That was clearly Misaka Imouto.

She had the shoulder-length brown hair and the military goggles on her forehead. She wore the short-sleeved white blouse, summer sweater, and pleated skirt. She stood there as if she had been remade in a mold.

Kamijou did not understand. He simply did not understand, but...

"Misaka apologizes. She intended to return there after she was finished working, says Misaka as she starts with an apology."

That gaze, that behavior, that atmosphere, that manner of speaking...It was clearly her.

"Hey, wait a second. You're Misaka Imouto, right?"

So was what he had seen a very real-seeming illusion after all? Kamijou felt dissatisfied in some way, but Misaka Imouto was standing before him the same as she had always been.

He lost strength in his legs and collapsed to the ground.

“Dammit. What the hell is going on?” he spat out. “Oh, sorry. This may sound really weird to you, but I seriously thought something bad had happened to you. But it seems you’re all right. I’m glad.”

“There are some parts of what you said that Misaka is having trouble understanding...”

(Well, I’m not sure how she was supposed to understand that.)

Kamijou didn’t know why he had seen that illusion, but he didn’t particularly care as long as Misaka Imouto was fine.

“...but Misaka is indeed dead, reports Misaka.”

Kamijou’s breathing froze.

Misaka Imouto was right in front of him, but Kamijou belatedly started to wonder what the body bag she was carrying over her shoulder was. The silhouette within was like a broken mannequin. The construction seemed off and the joints were all pointing in odd directions.

He looked toward it wondering what was inside. As he did, something jumped into the center of his vision. It was an object sticking out from the zipper of the body bag. The brown object was sticking out from the gap next to the zipper like it was a weed.

It was hair.

Kamijou was utterly shocked. A strange chill ran across his entire body.

(Is she carrying around a realistic life-sized doll or something?)

But that brown hair was much too familiar. The color, the gloss, and everything else about it was exactly the same as the hair belonging to the girl holding the body bag.

“Wait, wait. What are you carrying? What’s inside that body bag?”

“...? You do not know? asks Misaka in return. As you entered the testing site, Misaka assumed you were related to the experiment, but...yes, it is true that you do not look like someone related to the experiment, responds Misaka based on her intuition.”

(Experiment...?)

Kamijou fell silent as he had no clue what Misaka Imouto was talking about.

“Just to make sure, Misaka will check using the passcode, says Misaka as she does as she says. ZXC741ASD852QWE963, says Misaka testing you.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“As you were unable to decode that passcode, you do not seem to be related to the experiment, says Misaka having received logical proof backing up her intuitive assumption.”

Misaka Imouto’s words sounded like some kind of alien language to Kamijou.

He looked at her doubtfully.

“This body bag contains a Sister, responds Misaka.”

The voice that had answered Kamijou’s question had clearly been Misaka Imouto’s.

However, the voice as well as a footstep had come from *behind Misaka Imouto*.

The voice had sounded like it was coming from a ways down the alleyway.

This was not mistake in Kamijou’s senses. With the sound of more footsteps, someone approached from behind Misaka Imouto.

“Misaka apologizes for leaving the black cat behind, states Misaka.”

The person who had appeared from the darkness was a girl who looked exactly like Misaka Imouto.

(What? She looks just like Misaka Imouto...so is that Mikoto?)

“However, she did not want to get an animal involved in unnecessary conflict, says Misaka explaining her actions.”

However, that other girl’s footsteps were not the only ones.

“Misaka wishes to apologize to you for the same reason, says Misaka as she lowers her head.”

There were two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten...a seemingly endless number of footsteps.

“It seems the experiment caused you unnecessary worry, says Misaka as-...”

“But you do not need to worry...”

“So you were the one who called the police...”

“That was the appropriate decision...”

“Is the cat okay, asks Misa-...”

“Every Misaka here is Misaka, says...”

“But what would you have done if Misaka had been the murderer?”

“The details are classified, so Misaka cannot explain, but there was no trouble here, responds Misaka.”

“...Ah?”

Kamijou naturally stepped back as Misaka after Misaka appeared from behind the first. His back ran into something. He turned around and found more Misakas with identical expressionless faces.

“What...?”

Kamijou was left speechless at the sight and he tried to sort through everything that had happened.

Had what he had seen not been an illusion but actually the corpse of one of those identical Misakas? From the fact that Misaka Imouto was carrying the body, they seemed to be concealing it.

It was true that the blood could have been dried up in about a minute with a coagulant and heat from a dryer. Then they could clean it up as easily as tempura oil that had been hardened with a chemical. And the fingerprints and luminol reaction could be easily erased with chemicals.

But Kamijou found something to be odd.

From the very start, it was odd that there were so many people who looked exactly the same.

Monozygotic twins, often known as identical twins, were siblings with the same structure at a genetic level, but they were not actually as identical as they were often represented as being in dramas and novels.

Let's take a hypothetical man named Tanaka-san. Tanaka-san would clearly have very different ratios of muscle and fat depending on if he trained every day in order to become a baseball player or if he just ate sweets all day long doing nothing in particular.

With differences in sleep, exercise, eating habits, and stress, people's living patterns would change their physique even if they were the same at birth. And it was not normal for two people to maintain the exact same sleep, exercise, and eating patterns after living for ten or fifteen years.

The girls before his eyes were too identical.

They looked exactly like the girl named Misaka Mikoto.

It was like their sleep times had been measured with clocks, their exercise amounts had been measured with measuring devices, and their food portions had been measured with scales.

Yes, it was as if everything had been precisely measured in order to match Misaka Mikoto.

It was as if they had been created by someone.

"....."

Kamijou spun around looking at the area and then looked back at the body bag.

It seemed they knew him. It seemed they knew of the black cat. But then Kamijou had to wonder who the girl he had thought was Misaka Imouto had been. Was she with them or were there still more Misakas? Or was the Misaka Imouto he had been in contact the one inside the body bag?

"Do not worry, responds Misaka."

The Misaka holding the body bag spoke to Kamijou who was frozen in shock.

"The Misaka you were in contact with previously today was Serial Number 10032. In other words, this Misaka, responds Misaka." She pointed toward herself with her free hand. "The Misakas use their power to manipulate electricity to link their brain waves. The other Misakas merely share #10032's memories, explains Misaka."

Linking brain waves sounded unbelievable at first, but it was possible if they were twins. Brain waves differed from person to person like fingerprints and voice prints. Having someone else's brain waves flow into your brain would just destroy your brain cells, but if two people who were identical on the genetic level did it...

But Kamijou didn't particularly care about that.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"The Misakas are the Sisters, cellular clones created as mass-produced military models of the Original, one of the seven Level 5s of Academy City, answers Misaka."

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Merely an experiment, answers Misaka. Misaka apologizes again for getting you involved in this particular experiment, says Misaka as she lowers her head."

"What-...?" he started to ask, but then he closed his mouth.

The girls standing before him were simply too different and too remote.

♦

Kamijou was all alone as he leaned against the alley wall while holding the black cat.

The group of Misakas had disappeared as if they were melting into the darkness. They were likely taking the corpse to eliminate every bit of evidence. And the experiments would continue. He didn't know what they were, but those Misakas were being killed and then taken off somewhere without him knowing.

The term "cellular clone" brought the urge to vomit back to him. The spine of the book he had spotted in the used bookstore floated up in the back of his mind. "New! The Scientific Cows of the Farm Buildings". He was reminded of those beings that lived within the windowless buildings, breathed air-conditioned air, drank nutrients, and were raised solely to be eaten. He envisioned them having their guts cut open, their innards dragged out, their flesh sliced up, and then being packed up and distributed to supermarkets and butcher shops throughout the city. He tasted sour stomach acid coming from deep in his throat. He doubted he would be able to eat meat for a while.

However, there were pragmatists who did not care about things like that. The people behind the experiment were killing people in the same way that cows were killed, gutted, chopped up, and packed up, so they would likely continue the experiments without caring. Kamijou did not know what exactly the experiments entailed and he doubted he would understand something that repulsive even if it were explained to him. However, he could say one thing for sure. Allowing that experiment to continue would lead to more people being killed.

(...An experiment?)

That term caught in Kamijou's mind.

Misaka Imouto had called it an experiment, so was there a research facility behind it? If that were so, the use of the technical term “cellular clone” made sense. A cellular clone was not made like a normal baby. They were created from DNA extracted from a hair or a drop of blood.

Suddenly, Kamijou froze.

A hair.

To create a cellular clone, DNA was needed. It could be a single hair or a single drop of blood, but raw material like that was needed.

Misaka Imouto had said that they were mass-produced military models of Misaka Mikoto.

(It couldn’t be...)

Kamijou stopped breathing. He looked up at the rectangle of sky he could see as a thought of despair entered his mind.

(Does Misaka Mikoto know about this?)

Part 8

Dinner that night was yakiniku.

Komoe-sensei, who looked twelve years old, stood in the kitchen looking at a Luxurious Yakiniku Set she had bought on a special sale at the supermarket for twelve thousand yen. She had bought it partially because she had more people to feed dinner to and partially because it was a rank up from the eight-thousand-yen Wonderful Yakiniku Set she had bought previously.

It was not that unusual for Komoe-sensei to be serving multiple people for dinner. She was an educator to the core, so she had a habit of taking in girls who had run away from home and giving them a place to stay until they found what they wanted to do.

(It’s been a month since Izanami-chan left to go train to be a baker. The calm has been nice, but that’s a long time to be alone...)

Komoe-sensei pulled multiple cans of beer from the fridge in order to compare their flavor.

She wasn’t sure which season yakiniku was reminiscent of. After all, she lived in a time when any kind of food could be gotten year round.

However, that female teacher who looked twelve but could taste the differences between beers always ate yakiniku in the summertime. She had also decided to leave the cooking of the meat to the person staying with her who was paying zero rent. Her role that night was just to drink beer and eat meat, so she was feeling rather like royalty.

Her temporary roommate, Himegami Aisa, had finished setting up the iron griddle on the tea table in the center of the room and she sat in the lotus position in order to kill the worldly desire that went by the name of hunger. The lotus position may sound ostentatious, but she was really just sitting cross legged and wondering how long she had to wait to eat.

Komoe-sensei was the type of person that seasoned the meat before cooking it.

People's tastes varied, but Komoe-sensei loved to put tare on the meat before cooking it and then put more tare on after it cooked.

Of course, cooking meat with tare on it filled the room with the smell of smoke, but she did not mind. That room (for some reason) already had strange scribbles drawn all over the tatami mats and the walls, had the tatami sliced up by something like a sword, had blood stains left all over the place, had burn marks on the walls, and finally had its walls and ceiling destroyed by what seemed like a beam weapon. It had been patched up with plywood, but she could pretty much kiss her security deposit goodbye.

(...Uuh. Tomorrow I'm going to make sure to get Kamijou-chan to tell me what happened.)

Komoe-sensei sighed, but she brought a large plate of meat over to the tea table to get her spirits up. Himegami must have been the type that put a large amount of tare on the meat and ate it with rice because she already had the rice cooker nearby.

"Okay, now heat up the iron griddle. You lost the game of rock-paper-scissors, Himegami-chan, so you need to take those saibashi and begin your forced labor. Now cook up some yakiniku for me!"

"Okay. But first I will tell you a scary story from Academy City."

"...I am not the type to cry when told about the seven mysteries of Academy City. In fact, I have the disgrace of often being considered to be one of them."

However, the urban legends in Academy City were not the more occult type involving ghosts. They tended to be more along the lines of hidden bits of ridiculous science like UFOs.

A lot of the urban legends in Academy City had to do with the Imaginary Number District - Five Elements Institution also known as Primary Knowledge.

For example, there was the urban legend that Academy City started as a single laboratory. It said that the laboratory extended to include the company houses for the personnel, health facilities, and related laboratories until it reached the point of being a giant city.

However, no one knew where this supposed “first laboratory” was in the city.

There were of course plenty of rumors regarding that first laboratory. Some said it had been destroyed decades ago without anyone knowing what it was. Some said it was hidden deep underground. Some said it was seen every day but no one realized it because it had been disguised as an ordinary-looking school. Some said that a special power or imaginary technology had been used to warp space around it in order to hide it.

They may be referred to as the “seven mysteries”, but there were hundreds of variations on the rumors and there was not a single bit of substantiating evidence.

It was something that supposedly existed, but no one noticed it.

The Imaginary Number District - Five Elements Institution was said to be the district that did not fit any of the numbers for the 23 districts of Academy City.

And many different rumors of imaginary technology had been derived from this invisible laboratory known as the Imaginary Number District.

There was the supposed AI that controlled all of the ethics, militaries, and economies of the world via the internet.

There was the supposed Clone Dolly workshop that stored the DNA of great men and saints from around the world and had analyzed their genetics to the point that they could create as many geniuses as needed at the push of a button.

There was the idea that the Silicorundum synapses used in Tree Diagram’s processing engine could only be made with imaginary technology from the Imaginary Number District and thus could not be remade.

There was the supposed Hound Dog unit that was secretly working to search for the Imaginary Number District and would abduct anyone who got close to solving the mystery in order to torture them for information.

(There is also the idea that research on eternal youth has been completed in the Imaginary Number District and I am one of the samples. ...Saying that is just going too far. It’s a violation of my human rights.)

Komoe-sensei sighed as she held a beer in one hand.

Across the tea table from Komoe-sensei was Himegami who was waving both her hands around.

“Okay. Now for my scary story.”

“Oh, c’mon. Just hurry it up, hurry it up.”

“Okay. Here’s one. The scorched parts of yakiniku contains polynuclear aromatic carbons. That is a carcinogen.”

“Wait, that kind of real scary story isn’t summer-like at all!”

“You need not worry about it now. I am sure you have eaten plenty of them already without knowing it.”

“That’s just too much! Is this a plan to ruin my appetite so you can hog all the meat, Himegami-chan!?”

As Komoe-sensei was being toyed with in a bout of psychological warfare, the doorbell rang.

“Mh. It looks like I have a guest. It’s probably just a circular notice, so go politely deal with it, Himegami-chan. As you do, sensei will be here cooking and eating the meat.”

Himegami silently stood up while looking at Komoe-sensei who was clearly in a bad mood. She headed for the door, but then suddenly spun around.

“That beer can is made of aluminum which is a toxic metal. If you drink a lot, the toxin will build up within your body. That is one of the reasons that the Roman Empire collapsed. They used too much metal tableware. Heh heh.”

Komoe-sensei completely lost her appetite and she looked like she was about to cry.

“Also...”

“...There’s more?”

“I am in charge of cooking the meat today. You only need to eat the meat, Komoe-sensei.”

Himegami stood in front of the door and bent over to look out the peephole. Newspaper solicitors in the area were rather extreme, so in the worst case, there was no choice but to open the door just a bit with the chain lock still connected and take the “magic wand” known as an electronic gas gun from next to the door to stick it through the gap and respond with a full auto blast. (Note: Those were banned from sale in 1993 due to having too much destructive force. They are also known as Head Crushers.)

However, no one could be seen on the other side of the peephole.

“?”

Himegami grabbed the gas gun just to be safe and slowly opened the door to see if someone was playing a prank. As the door opened, it made a noise like it had struck something and stopped.

Himegami looked down to see if someone had left a block on the ground.

A pure-white nun was collapsed there. The door had struck her head. A calico cat was balled up next to her happily waving its tail around.

“I...I’m hungry.”

The collapsed person with an unknown residence and no job said something, but Himegami closed the door.

“Huh? Who was it?” asked Komoe-sensei.

“No one,” Himegami replied with complete calm.

However, someone started banging on the door with their last bit of strength. As she had no choice, Himegami opened the door again. The white nun held out Sphinx in her arms as if to say “at least take the cat”. Himegami felt too sorry for her, so she let Index in the room.

“I-I waited and waited but Touma never came home. I thought I was going to starve to death,” the limp white nun said. She was already sitting at the tea table and had grabbed a pair of saibashi in her fist. Himegami felt that it was a type of talent to feel that at home about having others feed you like that. The cat was sitting in Index’s lap with its mouth open and pointing up toward the ceiling. It seemed to be a tactic to snatch the bits of food that Index dropped.

Despite the sudden guest, the twelve-thousand-yen Luxurious Yakiniku Set had plenty in it. Index did not even know how to hold chopsticks properly and Komoe-sensei liked to help out others, so the teacher took the initiative and started cooking the meat.

“You’re asking what esper powers are?” Komoe-sensei responded while flipping over the meat on the iron griddle.

Index nodded slightly while staring at the half-cooked meat.

“Simply put, it is based on Schrödinger’s theories, but you may not be familiar with them.”

Komoe-sensei tried to use the saibashi to get the other two to eat some carrots instead of just eating meat, but they ignored it.

“Schrödinger?”

“Yes. Schrödinger is the name of a teacher of quantum mechanics. He left behind the story of Schrödinger’s cat. The story may sound rather cruel to those who love pets, so I think I’ll change it a bit.”

Komoe-sensei put vegetables on top of the meat that had finished cooking and placed them on Index’s small plate. Index immediately took off the vegetables and gave them to the cat, but the cat rejected them with a cat punch.

“There is a box here,” said Komoe-sensei as she grabbed a box for chocolates from the floor with her other hand. “Now what do you think is inside, Sister-chan?”

“Mh. Chocolates of course. Touma has the same kind in his house.”

“But this box has hard candy inside.”

“Why would you put that inside...?”

“Now then, Sister-chan. What is inside this box?”

“You just said it has hard candy inside!”

“Yes, but you don’t know unless you open it up. I could have been lying.”

“...”

“So there are now two possibilities: the possibility that chocolates are inside or the possibility that hard candies are inside. Of course, only one of those can be true. However, when we’re just talking about possibilities, both possibilities are jumbled together.”

Komoe-sensei lightly waved the box for chocolates around.

“Those two possibilities appear as a single result once the box is opened to check on what the contents are. Originally, the contents had a 50% chance of being chocolates and a 50% chance of being hard candies, but once you look it changes to a 100% chance of being chocolates.”

Komoe-sensei opened the box and small chocolates were inside.

“Now then,” she said closing the box again. “Assuming the two possibilities were 50% chocolates and 50% hard candies, what do you think is inside this box, Sister-chan?”

“??? I don’t really get it, but I saw chocolates in there just now.”

“Yes. A normal person will choose the 50% chance of chocolates at this point.” Komoe-sensei waved the box around again. “But what would happen if there was a person who could choose the 50% chance of hard candies?”

“Mhh? Then the contents of the box would become hard cand-...”

Index trailed off and seemed to have realized something.

A strange phenomenon outside of the normal would occur.

“That is the true identity of esper powers. There are many possibilities in this reality. Among them are the possibility that fire can come from one’s hand and the possibility of reading someone’s mind. Because those 1% possibilities differ from the 99% possibility of the natural thing happening, they can be referred to as supernatural powers.” Komoe-sensei spun around the saibashi. “However, this is also why supernatural powers are not almighty. For instance, in our example there was a 50% possibility of chocolates and a 50% possibility of hard candies, so there was a 0% possibility of gum being inside. These powers cannot be used in places or conditions that have no possibility in the first place.”

“???”

“When we refer to espers, we refer to someone whose ability to view the reality of the 50% chocolates vs. 50% hard candies differs from that of normal people. RPSK Syndrome, commonly referred to as a Poltergeist, is caused by children who are no longer able to properly view reality due to trauma or excessive stress. The Ganzfeld experiment used in esper development purposefully seals off the senses in order cut one off from the proper reality.” Komoe-sensei continued to spin the saibashi around. “Espers who are cut off from the proper reality gain a Personal Reality that differs from ours. As a result, they can distort a micro world using different laws. In other words they gain the power to destroy things without touching them or to see one year into the future by closing their eyes.”

Komoe-sensei’s words seemed like an otherworldly language, so Index did not understand.

“The development we carry out is to artificially create personal realities. Simply put, we use things like drugs and suggestions to help cause certain types of damage in the brain.”

Index felt a stab in her chest at the word “damage”.

A certain boy was always saying that he had no power. And he did so casually as if it was to be expected. But all that effort had been put in behind it all.

Index felt that she could not save him from that.

It wasn’t the fact that the boy had gained nothing after all that. It was the fact that he had gained nothing but accepted it with a smile like it was to be accepted. She simply could not save him from that.

“Actually, Kamijou-chan’s type is very important.”

"...? You know about Touma's power?"

"Well, Kamijou has been quite naughty ever since he came to the school. A lot has happened. Yes, a lot. Hee hee. Hee hee hee hee."

As Komoe-sensei put her hands to her cheeks and wiggled her body around, Index and Himegami froze in place. In their hearts they had one thought: Again, you bastard?

"But I personally feel that Kamijou-chan and all the other Level 0s need to be researched, too." Komoe-sensei alone did not notice that the atmosphere of the room had changed. "With esper development, a single curriculum should be able to awaken powers in anyone. Yet there are people in whom powers do not awaken. That must mean there is still a set of laws there we do not understand and that could be the key that leads to System."

"System?"

"That is the term for one who is not a god yet reaches the will of the heavens. Our goal is something beyond Level 5. We humans do not understand the truth of this world. However, that makes things simple. If someone who has a status above that of a human appeared, that person would be able to understand god's response."

"..."

Index's movements stopped.

She recognized what she had just heard. Kabbalah had the concept of the Tree of Sephirot. It was a diagram with ten levels that divided up the positions of humans, angels, and god. And on that Tree of Sephirot, the crucial position of God was nowhere to be found.

Ain Soph Aur, Ain Soph, Ain.

000, 00, 0.

As god's territory could not be understood by humans and the concept could not be expressed by humans, it was not shown on the Sephiroth.

However, a religious system had appeared to take advantage of that.

Their doctrine stated that, if humans could not understand, they merely had to gain bodies that surpassed those of humans.

They claimed that humans were gods in the process of being purified, so they could gain the bodies of gods and freely use the techniques of god by training themselves. They were the first mavericks of the Christian Church and they were even considered dangerous by the Apostle John.

It was known as Gnosticism.

“Ars Magna,” Himegami muttered while touching the large cross at her chest.

The man who had once used alchemy to reach Ars Magna had likely belonged to that ideology. After all, Ars Magna of alchemy was not the technique of turning lead to gold. *It was the technique of sublimating a human soul that had been dulled like lead into an angel’s soul that was like gold.*

Gnosticism was popular among those who strayed from the proper path in the occult because it involved usurping the power of god. Regardless of the differences in how they thought, humans all wanted to reach the same place.

Or...

♦

The sky had completely turned to the blue of night.

(...Oh, I wonder if Index is okay.)

Kamijou recalled the white nun who was (supposed to be) waiting back at his dorm room.

(I can’t exactly expect her to have the skills to cook, so she might be rolling around the ground out of hunger right now.)

He thought of calling her, but he quickly changed his mind.

He recalled that Index had ended up getting wrapped up the battle at Misawa Cram School the previous week because he had called her.

“...”

Kamijou stopped thinking about Index and focused on the task at hand.

He was heading for the Tokiwadai Middle School dorm in order to find Misaka Mikoto.

The bus stops in Academy City often used the names of school facilities such as “District 12 Takasaki University” or “District 22 Shizuna High School Pool”. That was not too surprising as all the busses in Academy City were school busses.

Luckily, there was a bus stop called “District 7 Tokiwadai Middle School Dormitory”. Normally, all of the busses would have stopped running by that time, but that line had special buses that ran at night for students that went to cram schools or summer courses. It was one of the many perks of a private school.

“So this is the place.”

Kamijou got off the bus with the black cat in one hand and looked up at the building. Normal concrete buildings were lined up around it, but that three-story building alone was made of stone. The Western-looking building was just stuck in the middle of everything else and it had an odd sense of history to it like a foreign dormitory had been moved from its original country and placed there. It had no garden or lawn. Just like the other buildings, it was standing right next to the sidewalk.

With such an impressive building, it almost made Kamijou laugh to see laundry hanging from the windows like in a normal dorm. The cat must have caught sight of the laundry flapping in the wind because it started moving its head in unison with it.

Kamijou headed for the main entrance, but it was locked up more tightly than he had expected. At first glance it appeared to be double doors made of wood, but it was probably actually made of a special carbon fiber material. It probably wouldn’t budge if a truck slammed into it.

The door knob seemed to be a sensor and he could see a red light inside the keyhole that was made to look old. Kamijou guessed offhand that it detected one’s fingerprint, checked one’s bodily electricity and pulse pattern from one’s skin, and maybe even checked one’s DNA code from the oil on one’s fingers.

A number of mailboxes were lined up next to the door. They were not much different from the newspaper box for a nice apartment. From the names on the mailboxes, Mikoto seemed to be in Room 208.

He had no option left but to use the intercom. Just like at a nice apartment building, it was set up so calculator-like buttons could be used to punch in the number of the room and it would connect directly to that room.

Contacting Mikoto’s room would be easy enough. He just had to enter 208 into the intercom.

But Kamijou hesitated to do so.

It was almost impossible that Mikoto had nothing at all to do with that experiment. After all, her cells would be needed to create those cellular clones known as the Sisters.

What was he supposed to say upon seeing her?

He was afraid to hear from Mikoto herself about that repulsive experiment that had no problem killing people. He was afraid to see Mikoto’s face as she spoke of that hidden truth.

The cat mewed uneasily.

Kamijou recalled the face of Mikoto, the girl he had met in front of the vending machine and who was certainly not shy.

Had that been an act in order to hide that truth?

Or was she actually so messed up that she could be cooperating with that repulsive experiment and knew the Sisters were dying, but was still able to smile like that?

Either way, that was not the image of Misaka Mikoto that Kamijou had built up in his head.

The instant he pressed the buttons for the intercom, that image would be shattered.

Kamijou realized that he was afraid of having that image destroyed.

He had no real reason.

It was just because walking back from school with Mikoto had been so comfortable.

"..."

Kamijou's finger trembled as he thought about pressing the buttons regardless. Once he pressed those buttons, there was no turning back. He couldn't erase the fact he had pressed them. Afterwards, the experiment Kamijou didn't know about would surely come avalanching down on him like a roller coaster that had made it up to the top of the first hill.

Kamijou didn't know what to do.

He still did not know what the best option was when he pressed the buttons for the intercom.

He heard the slight click of the plastic buttons being pressed.

With a bit of static over the speaker, an entrance to a world of the abnormal opened.

"Oh, um..."

He did not know what to say.

Yet he had to say something.

"...This is Kamijou. Is that Misaka?"

The words that left his mouth sounded horribly trite.

The few seconds of silence as he waited for a response seemed extremely heavy to Kamijou. He heard some noise over the intercom. It was the sound of someone on the other side breathing. Most likely, Mikoto was on the other side of the intercom. She would be relaxed because she thought Kamijou did not know anything of the experiment.

After a slight, ever so slight pause...

“Oh, Kamijou-san, did you say?” responded a much slower voice that was clearly not Mikoto’s.

“Oh, crap. Did I get the wrong room number?”

“No, no, you didn’t. Do you have business with Onee-sama? I am her roommate.”

The voice sounded familiar, and Kamijou remembered why after thinking for a second. She was the Shirai Kuroko girl that had called Mikoto “onee-sama” the previous evening.

“Oh, I see. Well, from your response, I’m guessing Misaka is not back yet...”

“Correct. But she should be back soon. That entrance functions both as security and to enforce the curfew,” said the slow voice over the intercom. “If you have business with Onee-sama, I suggest you come inside. Otherwise, you might just barely miss her.”

He heard the sound of the intercom cutting off followed by the sound of the entrance unlocking. From the multiple metallic noises, it seemed multiple types of locks were used. The cat looked surprised by the fairly brutal noise.

(Should I...really go in there?)

Kamijou looked unsure, but he really did need to speak with Mikoto, so he took her roommate up on her offer.

He passed through the main entrance to find a giant hall. The interior looked like a place nobles would live in. The walls and ceiling were mostly white and a red carpet covered the floor. He thought it might just have been nouveau riche tastes, but he also had a feeling that an intruder would greatly stand out with that coloration.

He wasn’t sure if the residents were merely well-behaved or if the building had good soundproofing, but the area was wrapped in a calm silence like a shrine or a temple. Kamijou ignored the corridors stretching off to the left and right of the entrance hall and headed for the staircase in the center of the hall that led to the second and third floors. According the mailboxes, Mikoto’s room was Room 208. Kamijou guessed that it was somewhere on the second floor.

He climbed the stairs and walked down the second floor passageway on the left.

He found Room 208 almost right away. The number was displayed on the wooden door in gold numbering. The cat stared at its reflection in the polished door and Kamijou felt it was like the door to a hotel room. However, there was not an intercom on the door inside like in a hotel.

Kamijou lightly knocked on the door and a voice responded.

“Come in. It isn’t locked, so you can open it yourself.”

He opened the door and the inside was like a hotel room as well. There was a door to what was likely a unit bathroom immediately inside and there were two beds, a side table, and a small refrigerator further in. There was nothing like a closet, so it seemed all personal items were kept in the giant suitcases next to the beds.

Despite being in her room, Shirai Kuroko still had her hair up in pigtails. She was still wearing summer clothes, so she looked a tad unnatural sitting on the bed.

Shirai must not have been very interested in animals because she did not look at the black cat in Kamijou’s arms.

(But y’know...)

Kamijou looked around the room again. Even if her roommate had given him permission, he still felt awkward being in a girl’s room when she wasn’t there. Seeing how he was acting, Shirai Kuroko laughed a bit.

“Sorry. This room is really only to sleep in, so it is not really made to entertain guests. Please just sit on the other bed while you wait for Onee-sama.”

“...No, I can’t sit on her bed without permission.”

“Do not worry. That is my bed.”

“Then what the hell are you doing rolling around on someone else’s bed!? Are you some kind of pervert!?”

“Mh. You cannot just call people perverts like that. Everyone has things they could never tell people about but that they consider to be perfectly fine in their hearts. You know, like putting a girl you like’s recorder in your mouth or stealing the saddle to her bike.”

“I don’t do things like that! How can you pervert such pure feelings like that!? First Mikoto and now you! Is this the true face of the ‘high class lady’!?”

Despite Kamijou’s exclamation, Kuroko merely puffed out her cheeks as if she refused to accept what he was saying.

(Wow. Mikoto’s school life must be like a battlefield.)

Kamijou leaned up against the wall.

“I assumed you were her underclassman because you called her ‘onee-sama’, but I guess you’re actually a classmate.”

The cat started struggling because it wanted to check out the small space under the bed, but Kamijou did not allow it to escape his arms.

“No, no. I am most certainly Onee-sama’s underclassman. I merely had her previous roommate leave...in a completely legal way of course.”

Kamijou’s face stiffened in fright and Kuroko continued to speak.

“...Onee-sama has a lot of enemies. I suppose that is the fate of those with great power, but don’t you think it would just be too tough for her to have a traitor sleeping in the same room as her?”

“...”

Kamijou fell silent and the cat stopped struggling and looked up at his face.

“So,” Kuroko said while looking at Kamijou, “are you the gentleman that has been having frequent disputes with Onee-sama?”

“?”

As Kamijou had no memories, he wasn’t really sure. It seemed Mikoto was some kind of an acquaintance of his from before, but he didn’t know what kind of relationship it had been.

Kuroko glanced over at Kamijou’s curious look and she sighed.

“...If not, that’s fine, but I was just hoping to get a look at the person who has been supporting onee-sama.”

“Supporting?”

“Yes. She may not be aware of it, but everyone can tell that she happily mentions this gentleman at meals, during baths, and while going to sleep.” Kuroko sighed again. “...And yet she has someone who wants to be her ally right here. Her face makes it look like that is the one place for her in this world. Whoever it is has left quite an impression on her.”

Kamijou looked on with a puzzled expression as Kuroko started to get slightly contrary.

“...? But is that really the kind of person she is? It seemed to me like she was always standing in the center being the leader.”

“That is exactly why. Onee-sama usually acts as the leader, so she can stand in the center of everyone, but she cannot intermingle with everyone. She stands at the top and defeats her enemies, but she cannot avoid making more enemies at the same time. What is most important to Onee-sama is someone she can feel on the same level as. That’s how I see it at least.”

“...”

Kamijou recalled the Mikoto he had met in the evening.

She had been selfish and hot-tempered, she hadn’t listened to what he tried to tell her, and she had started biri biri-ing the instant something happened. However, he had a feeling her shoulders had been quite relaxed. It was as if she were stretching after having a constant great weight removed from those shoulders.

The afterschool walk with Kamijou had been a safe zone for Mikoto.

Her smile had been believably honest and almost too defenseless.

But...

Was that really true? Was being next to Kamijou the only time Mikoto smiled? Was there no possibility that she was simply an abnormal person who could easily smile and talk casually with Kamijou despite seeing the Sisters killed before her eyes?

Kamijou thought about it for a bit and felt the urge to vomit.

(Why can’t I just trust in her?)

“I’m sure onee-sama ended up acting like that without realizing it,” said Shirai Kuroko as she slightly narrowed her eyes.

Her voice sounded like she was dreaming of a position she herself could never reach.

“When she does realize it, she most likely gets embarrassed and becomes more aggressive than is necessary.”

Kamijou’s breathing stopped for an instant.

He had just thought of Mikoto as scary and then he felt he himself was pathetic for finding her scary. However, he still could not stop himself from feeling that way about her. If his guesses were correct, then Mikoto knew about the experiment and knew the Sisters were being cruelly killed and yet she was still cooperating with it.

And she had walked next to him smiling despite knowing all that.

A strange metaphor appeared in the back of his mind. He envisioned her chowing down on food that was on the same table as smashed up organs.

Kamijou did not want to think of Mikoto as being that kind of person.

He hesitated to ask her about the experiment.

However, he could not just leave Misaka Imouto in that situation either.

Because of all that, Kamijou no longer knew what to do.

And just as he was thinking through all that, he heard footsteps coming down the hallway outside the door. The black cat looked up.

A sticky sweat appeared on Kamijou's palm.

(Is Mikoto back!?)

That was supposed to be what Kamijou wanted, but for some reason he was assaulted by intense nervousness and unease. His heart beat with odd strength and irregularity.

Kuroko listened for an instant and then jumped up from the bed.

"Oh, no. That sounds like the dorm supervisor making her rounds!"

"...Hah?"

Kamijou was taken aback by that unexpected comment and Kuroko waved her arms about.

"Wh-what do we do? This will get very bad if the dorm supervisor finds out about you."

"You seem awfully sure. Can you tell just from the footsteps?"

"She is dangerous enough that you need to be able to tell it's her just from her footsteps. Anyway, she is an evil existence that checks on people's rooms without warning, so you need to hide under the bed."

Kuroko suddenly started pushing on Kamijou's head to force him under Mikoto's bed. The cat mewed in dissatisfaction.

"Ow! Wait, dammit! I'm not gonna fit in that space!"

"It is not normal for a gentleman to be in Tokiwadai's dorm! Ahh, this is a pain, so I'll just teleport y-...huh? Why won't my power work on you!?"

"Oh, that's probably Imagine Breaker It-....ow! Listen, damn you!"

Eventually, Kamijou and the cat were stuffed under the bed like luggage being stuffed into a car's trunk. Surprisingly, the area below the bed had been cleaned nicely, so there was no dust.

(But they wear their shoes inside here, so there's really nothing different about this than pressing my cheek up against the ground outside!)

Not only was the area under the bed cramped, but something was already there. Kamijou was being pushed into a large stuffed bear about as tall as he was.

Just as Kamijou was considering pushing the bear out of the way, he heard the door open without even a single knock. He heard a low female voice.

"Shirai. It is time for dinner, so get down to the dining room. ...Where is Misaka? I have received no notification of her being away and roommates are responsible too when someone breaks curfew, so I hope you do not mind receiving a demerit."

Apparently, it really was the dorm supervisor.

He was in a rather hopeless situation, but he was somehow relieved. He was relieved that it had not been Misaka Mikoto that had entered the room.

He then heard Kuroko speaking.

"Oh, I believe she had rather urgent business, so she did not have time to submit a notification. I believe in Onee-sama, so I cannot accept a demerit."

It seemed the dorm supervisor pushed Kuroko out of the room. Kamijou waited tensely under the bed for a bit. He could not tell what was going on while under the bed and it would not be too surprising if the dorm supervisor came back, so he couldn't just casually crawl out from under the bed.

(Hoo...It'll probably be difficult to leave the dorm with things like this.)

Kamijou sighed and then looked over at the stuffed bear under the bed with him.

At first he thought it seemed fancier than he would have thought Mikoto would like, but when he looked closer, he saw one of its eyes was covered with an eyepatch, it had bandages wrapped around its entire body, and it had stitches like with Frankenstein. It was more funky than fancy. The black cat in his arms glared at it.

Suddenly, the cat started punching at the bear with its front paws.

Despite being in the desperate situation of being underneath a bed in a girl's dorm, Kamijou couldn't help but find the cat punches to be cute. Suddenly, he heard a terrible ripping noise.

“Obwah! D-don’t bring out your claws, you idiot!”

“Fgyah!” the cat yelled as Kamijou pulled the cat away. He then ran his hand over the ripped fabric. He felt something hard inside the stuffed bear. It was like something was inside the bear.

Looking closer, he could see that a few of the stitches had been remade into zippers. It had quite a few small pockets in it. He stroked the bear to check and felt something like a small bottle inside. There might have been perfume hidden inside and the cat had been unable to stand the smell. It seemed Mikoto used the bear to hide the objects that were against school rules. It was almost like someone running drugs.

Given the size of the stuffed bear, Mikoto must have had a lot of things she didn’t want people finding. Kamijou sighed and took his hand off of the bear.

“Huh?”

He then noticed something.

The bear had a thick collar around its neck that looked a bit like a belt and it said “Killbear”. That was likely the bear’s name, but that didn’t really matter.

Looking from above, a zipper around the neck could be seen hidden by the collar. It was made so it could not be opened with the tight collar in the way. Also, the collar had a large padlock on it that doubled as part of the decoration. That zipper was clearly used differently from the others.

Most likely, what was in there was the thing Mikoto least wanted anyone to see. Kamijou didn’t want to pry, but the zipper was still half open. It seemed there was paper inside. The corner of a piece of paper was sticking out of the half open zipper. That was all. There was nothing else to it. Kamijou felt he could easily ignore it. It wasn’t right to dig down into other’s secrets. It wasn’t right, but the paper had the following written in typed lettering.

Test Number 07-15-2005071112-A. Using the Radio Noise Sisters to Shift the Level 5 Accelerator to

Kamijou was in utter shock. Only the corner of the paper was sticking out from the zipper, so he could not read the rest. He closed his eyes. Most likely, there would be no going back once he read that. He was at his last chance to turn back.

The cat let out a menacing hiss to express its dislike of the perfume.

“…”

Kamijou thought for an instant and then opened his eyes.

If he could just pretend he had not seen that, he would not have been there in the first place.

To get the paper out, he would have to completely open the half-open zipper. However, the thick collar with the padlock was in the way. Normally, that would have been a major problem, but this was a stuffed animal. Kamijou merely tightly squeezed the stuffed bear's neck. The soft stuffing easily changed shape and a space opened up between the collar and the bear. Kamijou stuck his fingers in that space and opened the zipper.

He found a report of almost twenty pages inside. From the date and file name written on the edges of the paper it seemed to be a printout of a file.

"Using the Radio Noise Sisters to Shift the Level 5 Accelerator to Level 6."

That was the name of the name of the report.

(Level...6?)

Kamijou was confused. He had thought the highest level was 5.

He crawled out from under the bed and started looking over the report.

The report never once mentioned the names of the laboratories or people involved. It was as if it had been made so no real evidence would remain even if the report were leaked out by some mistake.

The report was very technically written, so there were a lot of words that were not in Japanese. Kamijou used his knowledge to its fullest in order to somehow transform it into something he could understand.

"Academy City has seven Level 5s. However, the predictive calculations of Tree Diagram have established that there is a single one of them who is capable of reaching the as yet unseen Level 6. The other Level 5s are either growing in a different direction or their bodily balance would be lost by an increase in dosage."

There was a list of seven esper names with various types of graphs, but Kamijou skipped past them.

"The sole person who is able to reach Level 6 is known as Accelerator."

Accelerator.

Kamijou frowned at that unfamiliar word.

There was a supplementary explanation in a foreign language, but Kamijou skipped past it as he could not read it.

“Accelerator is in reality Academy City’s strongest Level 5. According to Tree Diagram’s calculations, he would reach Level 6 after 250 years of undergoing the regular Curriculum.”

Kamijou read the next line in shock.

As reference data, it stated that a few ways of having a person remain active for 250 years were given in a different report.

“We searched for a method that does not require using those 250 year methods. As a result, Tree Diagram led us to a different method than the usual Curriculum. It is based on the fact that use of esper powers in actual battle quickens the growth process. There have been many reports of those with Telekinesis or Pyrokinesis gaining increased accuracy, so we are going to take advantage of this. By preparing special battlefields and having the battles proceed according to specific scenarios, we can control the direction of the growth gained in the battles.”

Kamijou’s hand froze.

Battle. He felt like that word clicked together with the corpse of the Sister lying in that back alley.

“According to the calculations carried out by Tree Diagram’s simulator, it was determined that preparing 128 types of battlefields and having him kill Railgun 128 times would allow Accelerator to shift to Level 6.”

Kamijou recognized the word Railgun.

“–*You know, you should brag more that you defeated me, Misaka Mikoto, the Railgun*.”

Kamijou figured it must be referring to her, but he felt like the way it referred to her was not quite appropriate for someone who was supposedly cooperating with their experiment.

Kill.

Kamijou’s hands started trembling. His breathing grew erratic and he leaned up against the wall because he felt like the floor was shaking.

“However, we cannot of course prepare 128 Railguns as she is also a Level 5. That is when our attention turned to the Sisters project meant to mass produce Level 5s that we had been carrying out at the same time.”

His heart was beating oddly. He could tell that his body temperature had left his fingertips. The mewing of the black cat shook his brain like a church bell.

“Of course, there is a difference in specs between the original Railgun and the mass produced Sisters. The power of the mass produced model is largely estimated to be around Level 3.”

Kamijou’s heart told him there was something definitively wrong about what was written there.

“According to Tree Diagram’s recalculation based on those criteria, it was determined that preparing twenty thousand battlefields and twenty thousand Sisters would produce the same result as described above.”

However, they were going ahead and doing things that were wrong based on that wrongness.

“The twenty thousand types of battlefields and battle scenarios are explained in a different report.”

Kamijou wondered what was written in that other report.

Twenty thousand ways of dying. By going down the list of the Sisters’ numbers, you could see when, where, and how they would all die. It was simply too repulsive. What Kamijou found most repulsive was not the ones carrying out the killing. It was the fact that the ones being killed were continuing to follow through with the scenario.

“*–…It is impossible for Misaka to raise this cat, honestly replies Misaka. Misaka lives in an environment that is slightly different from yours, says Misaka giving a reason*.”

What had she been thinking then?

What had she been thinking as she looked at the cat and what had she been feeling when she gave it to Kamijou?

“The method of creating the Sisters was carried out the same as in the original project. A zygote is prepared from the cells taken from Railgun’s hair and growth is accelerated by administering Zid-02, Riz-13, and Hel-03.”

She was in such a hopeless situation.

What had that girl been thinking that lead to her not asking for help?

“As a result, they obtain physically fourteen-year-old bodies the same as Railgun in about fourteen days. As the clones were created from the already deteriorating cells and had their growth accelerated with drugs, it is highly likely that they will have shorter lifespans than Railgun. However, it is estimated to not be extreme enough to affect their specs during the experiment.”

Had the girl been in despair?

Had she been in despair because she had determined that she could not be saved no matter what she chose or how things proceeded?

“The real problem does not lie in the hardware of their bodies. It lies in the software of their personalities. The basic information in the brain such as language, motion, and ethics take form from the ages of 0-6. However, the Sisters only have 144 hours for that due to their abnormal growth rate. It is difficult to teach them by standard methods. As such, we have used Testaments to install all of that basic information.”

Or...

Had she believed that her dying at someone else’s hands was part of everyday life?

Had she not been in despair, not given up, and merely believed that was the normal environment for her?

“The first 9802 experiments will be performed inside, but the remaining 10198 experiments must be performed outdoors due to the requirements for the battlefield. Due to issues regarding the disposal of bodies, we have narrowed the battlefields down to a single district of Academy City.”

(Fuck that.)

Kamijou crushed the report in his hands.

“Damn them...”

Kamijou couldn’t stand it. He gritted his teeth. No matter how hard you searched for a reason why it was okay to kill twenty thousand people for a single elite esper, you would never find it.

However, this insane report still existed within Kamijou’s hands.

The reality before his eyes was so cruel that he wouldn’t have been able to stand it even if it had been fiction.

“...God damn them!”

A certain girl had been created just so she could be killed.

She was a mass of flesh that had been born by taking a nucleus from someone’s cell and implanting it in an unharmed ovum which was then mixed together with a few chemicals in a test tube.

That girl who looked fourteen had spent her entire life imprisoned in a cold laboratory where she was referred to by a number instead of a name.

So what?

Even if Misaka Imouto had only been created to be killed, even if she had been created from the nucleus of someone's cell being implanted in an ovum, and even if she had always lived in a cold laboratory referred to by a number instead of a name...

She was still the person who had reached out to pick up the drinks Kamijou had dropped.

She was still the person who had gotten the fleas off of the calico cat.

It hadn't appeared on her face, but Misaka Imouto had seemed somehow happy with the black cat.

Those things may not have seemed too special. To normal people, those things meant nothing. They did them without really thinking about it and they looked like nothing other than that.

However, that also meant that Misaka Imouto was a human who could do normal things like normal people.

She was not something that could be referred to as an experimental animal.

"...Why don't you realize that?"

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

The cat mewed and it resounded throughout the room that held a silence like a graveyard.

Since the report had been hidden there and since Misaka Imouto was a clone created from Mikoto's cells, Mikoto definitely had something to do with the experiment. Kamijou could not understand how someone could go along with that bloody experiment that could only be accomplished by killing twenty thousand people. He tightly clenched his fist without meaning to.

"Huh?"

He then noticed something else.

The report was a printout of a file. At the top left of the copy paper, the date and file name were written.

In and of itself, that was not a problem.

However, there were two barcodes along with those things. They were like the barcodes on the back of a book and there was one right above another.

"..."

Academy City had various types of network terminals and they all had different security ranks. For instance, a cell phone was Rank D, a computer in a library or at home was Rank C, the information terminals that teachers used were Rank B, the specialized terminals in research facilities were Rank A, and the secret terminals used by the board of directors were Rank S.

They connected to the same network, but a Rank D terminal could not access Rank C information.

This did not create a kind of ruling class or anything. It was simply that the ones managing the network did not want students to be able to access data on final exams or health examinations.

(Wait a second. These barcodes are...)

Kamijou looked at the barcodes at the top left of the report. He was pretty sure that the top barcode was the terminal ID and the lower barcode was the data ID. Similar to the barcodes on a box of sweets, it was a bunch of black and white stripes with numbers lined up below.

The top one, the terminal ID, was 415872-C.

The bottom one, the data ID, was 385671-A.

(That's odd.)

The terminal rank was C, but the data rank was A. That should have been impossible. If Mikoto had obtained that report via a proper route, she could have just used a Rank A terminal in the laboratory.

That meant she had not obtained the information via a proper route.

Hacking. No, he thought it was actually called cracking when information was being spied on rather than destroyed. He didn't really know too much about that kind of thing, but it didn't really matter. What was important was that Mikoto had not obtained the report via a proper route.

In other words, Mikoto may not have been cooperating with the experiment.

"..."

Kamijou looked back over the report.

As he flipped through the pages, he suddenly felt a piece of paper that was thicker than the others. To find out why it felt different, Kamijou pulled that piece of paper out from the report.

It was a map.

The map displayed all of Academy City. It was folded up, but when spread out it was as big as a bookshelf. It had been stuffed in the middle of the report and was made of extremely thin paper, so Kamijou had not noticed it until then.

The map included the location of the back alleys and buildings making it rather detailed. And there were X's written in red marker in various places on the map.

"...?"

Those marks seemed quite ominous, but the map did not give the names of buildings.

Kamijou pulled out his cell phone. It had GPS functionality just like a car navigation device. Kamijou looked at the X's on the map and looked up their coordinates on his cell phone. When he magnified it, the name of the buildings came up on the map displayed on his cell phone.

"Kanasaki University Muscular Dystrophy Research Institution."

(Muscular dystrophy?)

Kamijou was confused. Muscular dystrophy was a type of incurable disease. Simply put, it was a disease that left you unable to send signals to your muscles and the muscles grew weaker and weaker as they could not be moved.

But what connection did a muscular dystrophy research institution have to do with that report? Still confused, Kamijou checked the names of the other buildings with X's on them.

"Mizuho Organization Pathology Analysis Laboratory."

"Higuchi Pharmaceutical Seventh Pharmaceutics Research Center."

Kamijou was not very familiar with the names of laboratories, but he then remembered something. He recalled the news scrolling by on the blimp's exhibition display. It had said that three research institutions had been evacuated over a two week period. The cat mewed in dissatisfaction. What was it Mikoto had said upon seeing that news?

"*–I hate that blimp*."

Kamijou's breath caught in his throat. There was the map stuck in the middle of the report, the X's in red marker, and the laboratories all looking into the same disease. If

you put together the report, the experiment, and the map, it seemed like it showed the laboratories that were working on that experiment. However, what did the word “evacuate” mean? And what did the red X’s on the map mean?

Kamijou felt dizzy. He did not know why. However, he suddenly had a single question in his mind.

It was fairly late at night, so why had Misaka Mikoto not returned to her dorm yet?

Where was she and what was she doing?

It might have been nothing. She might have steam coming from her head as she got lost in playing a fighting game in an arcade. However, something seemed ominous. The laboratories had been evacuated and there were red X’s on that map as if following them. It was almost as if the buildings had been crushed from the map by those X’s. And the marks were not black, they were not blue, they were not circles, and they were not squares. They were red X’s. What did that mean?

Kamijou had determined that the report had not been obtained via a proper route.

Due to that, he had guessed that Mikoto may not be cooperating with the experiment.

What if Mikoto had refused to cooperate with the researchers?

What if the experiment had continued anyway against her will and she later found out?

What action would she take then?

And if she were taking action to stop the experiment...

“I see...”

If she were taking action for the sake of Misaka Imouto...no, all of the Sisters...

“So that’s it.”

He did not know exactly what Mikoto was trying to do, but there was one thing he could say for sure.

Misaka Mikoto did not think that the experiment was nothing.

He didn’t know what reason she had to put on a smile before him to hide that truth, but Misaka Mikoto did not think that experiment was nothing.

Kamijou Touma could certainly be Misaka Mikoto’s ally.

He had a feeling that waiting around there would not help anything. No, even if that were the best course of action, he could not stand to wait around there doing nothing for even a second longer.

Kamijou grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck and burst out of the room. He gave no thought to the possibility of being spotted. Not caring if anyone saw him, he ran down the hallway, down the stairs, and out the main entrance.

Part 9

It must have taken him quite some time to read the report because the sky was completely covered in the darkness of night.

Kamijou ran through a shopping district at night.

The cat in his arms let out a sick-sounding mew at being shaken around.

Currently, Kamijou had no basis for his actions. He had no idea what Mikoto was doing, he had no idea where Mikoto was, and he had no idea if he should be worried about that. However, the vague situation that lack of knowledge gave him made him feel all the more uneasy. He ran on without knowing anything. It was like he was immersing himself in the action to rid himself of that unease.

He had no particular goal, but he had to search. That contradiction caused him to hurry even more. He had no choice but to blindly run around searching for Mikoto.

But he was also relieved.

He was relieved that he could actually worry about Mikoto again.

Kamijou ran on through a crowd. The blades of the distant wind turbines moved around slowly. Just as he started to think that he didn't feel any wind, he suddenly stopped.

The blades were spinning despite there being no wind.

A single turbine was slowly spinning about a hundred meters away. He found it odd and then a likely explanation came to his mind.

The power generator was actually a motor. The motor had an interesting property. The central coil that was supposed to spin when electricity was used would create electricity upon being spun manually. And the motors would rotate when supplied with specific electromagnetic waves. That was how Academy City's latest microwave generators worked.

If the blades, and therefore motor, were spinning without any wind, then it must be reacting to invisible electromagnetic waves.

(If I head for that...)

Kamijou adjusted his grip on the cat and cut back and forth through the crowd. The boys and girls in the crowd focused on Kamijou who was disrupting the flow of the crowd, but he did not care. He did not have time to care.

At first the wind turbine had been only slightly shaking making it hard to tell if it was actually spinning or not. However, as Kamijou ran along the street cutting around corners in order to reach that turbine, the movements of the blades grew bit by bit. And past that slowly moving turbine was one moving slightly faster. And beyond that one was one moving faster yet again.

It was as if he were approaching the center of some invisible explosion.

Kamijou continued to run.

He ran to the outskirts of that lightless city as if drawn in by those windmills spinning in the windless night.

CHAPTER 3

Railgun.

Level5.

Part 1

The sky had turned to the black of the sea at night.

The moon was in a crescent shape. The narrow moon looked like a sneering mouth and its light was much too weak. The street lights did not reach an iron bridge a ways from the center of the city. With the black of the river running below as well, the area seemed to have sunken into darkness.

Misaka Mikoto had her hands on the handrail as she vacantly stared at the distant lights of the city.

Bluish-white sparks crackled around her.

The term “electrical attack” had a frightening ring to it, but it was a kind light to her. She could not forget the night on which she first became able to use her power. She had crawled under her blanket and sent out small sparks all night long. She had seen them as sparkling stars. She had seriously thought that she might be able to create a starry sky one day when she was older and stronger.

That was how she had been before she grew up.

Now, she did not feel she had the right to have dreams.

“…”

She clenched her fists and then opened them again.

With just that motion, Mikoto’s eyes narrowed slightly in a smile.

That simple action was one that everyone took for granted.

However, there were people in the world who could not take that simple action.

"...Muscular dystrophy, hm?" were the words that came from her small lips.

Muscular dystrophy was an incurable disease of unknown cause where one's muscles slowly become unusable. As the muscles became unusable, the strength of the muscles fell. Eventually, that loss of muscular strength spread throughout the entire body and even the freedom of the heart and lungs was lost.

Of course, Mikoto did not have muscular dystrophy.

Nor did she have someone close to her who suffered from it.

But she had thought that life would be a tough one.

They had done nothing wrong, but they were born with a body that would not move as they wanted it to, they had to watch helplessly as their body grew weaker and weaker, and they finally became unable to get up off of a bed. No matter much they tried to reach out their hand asking for help, no one would come to grab that hand. She had felt that life was just too much.

A researcher had asked her if she wanted to try to help those people

The researcher had said that those with muscular dystrophy might be able to be saved using her power. The man in the lab coat had then tried to shake her hand.

Muscular dystrophy was a disease that made one's muscles not move as you wanted them to.

And the brain's instructions were sent to the muscles with electrical signals.

If someone had the power to manipulate their own bodily electricity, they might be able to send signals to the muscles via a different way than the usual nerve route.

She might be able to bring a saving light to those people who were being swallowed up bit by bit by unease and fear as they helplessly saw their bodies getting weaker and weaker.

"..."

A certain young child had believed those words without a shred of doubt.

She had thought that, if her Electromaster power could be studied, it could be "transplanted" into others and save all those suffering from muscular dystrophy.

That was how Misaka Mikoto's DNA map had been officially recorded into Academy City's Bank.

However, recently there had been a rumor spreading throughout Academy City that her DNA map had been used to create military Sisters. It wasn't that rare an occurrence. Mikoto was one of the seven Level 5s and a scholarship student at the prestigious esper development school of Tokiwadai Middle School. There had been countless baseless rumors like that about her. That was why she had not believed the rumor.

Or perhaps she had simply not wanted to believe it.

However, that girl's wish had been shattered in a way she had never expected.

"..."

A mass production line had already been created for the Radio Noise Sisters that had been created for military use. An inexhaustible supply could be created at the press of a button.

And the Sisters that had been created did not even get to live the life of a weapon. Instead, their sole purpose in life was to be killed as experimental animals. They were like frogs to be dissected.

"Why...did it end up like this?" Mikoto muttered with trembling lips.

The reason was obvious. It was because she had carelessly shared her DNA map when she was little. She did not know if that man in the lab coat had been lying from the start or if the proper research had been changed partway through.

There had once been a little girl who had wished to save some troubled people.

But that girl's wish had resulted in twenty thousand people being killed.

"..."

That was why that girl wished to stop it.

Even if it cost her her life, she had to stop that insane experiment.

She did not think she was being cool by betting her life. She did not especially want to die. In fact, her body was trembling, her fingertips had gone pale and cold, and she could not gather her thoughts properly as if there was static scattered throughout the back of her head.

If she could, she wanted to yell out for help.

But she could not allow herself to do that.

The face of a certain boy floated up in the back of her mind. That older boy had an unknown power that had allowed him to easily deal with one of Academy City's Level 5s yet he was branded a Level 0. That boy was strong enough that, without bluffing, he could honestly write off that unfair treatment as "not mattering". That strong boy held great power yet was not proud and he treated both strong and weak equally and without discrimination.

She suddenly recalled that she had fought with that boy on that same iron bridge just a few weeks before.

That boy had acted foolishly in an attempt to get some delinquents to chase after him. He did not even know those delinquents, but he had been trying to distance them from Mikoto who was quick to start a fight.

If Mikoto had already known everything about the experiment hidden in the underside of the city at that time, and had she called to that boy for help, would he have stood up for her?

She was sure he would have.

She had a feeling that boy could do what she could not.

But she also felt it would be cowardly to ask him to help her.

It was Mikoto's fault that around ten thousand Sisters had been killed and the remaining ten thousand were still standing on the verge of death. Could someone who had committed such a great crime—could a monster whose hands were soaked in blood, flesh, bone, fat, and guts—really ask for help? She did not think so.

"...Help me."

That was why Mikoto let out that voice in that place where it would reach no one.

Her frightened, wounded, and tattered voice merely disappeared into the darkness.

"Help me..."

That cry that would reach no one spilled uncontrollably from her mouth.

And then she heard the mewing of a kitten.

Mikoto looked down. Instead of darkness, she saw a kitten sitting at her feet that had black fur that held gentle warmth. The black cat looked up at her and mewed with that young face that looked like the face of a pure unblemished child.

She wondered where the cat had come from.

And then she heard a footstep.

"..."

Mikoto looked up.

With no street lights, the only light was the pale moonlight from the wire-thin crescent moon. This left that iron bridge covered in darkness as if it represented the environment surrounding her.

"...What are you doing?"

That boy appeared as if he were tearing through that darkness.

He appeared like a hero rushing over in response to the cries of a girl being swallowed up by the darkness.

Part 2

Mikoto stood alone on the iron bridge staring vacantly into the night.

When Kamijou saw her at a distance, he honestly thought it would crush his heart. She looked so exhausted that she seemed weak, fragile, and about to disappear. It was even more painful because of how lively she usually was.

For that reason, Kamijou hesitated to call out to her.

But he had to call out to her.

"...What are you doing?"

After he spoke, Mikoto looked at him.

The Mikoto before him was the usual lively, smart-assed, and selfish Misaka Mikoto.

"Hmn. I'm free to do whatever I want wherever I want. After all, I'm the Level 5 Railgun. The kinds of delinquents who I might run into at night don't even come close to being a danger to me. And you have no right to say anything to me about this."

However, Kamijou felt like he could see past that mask because it was simply too perfect.

He couldn't look at that mask anymore.

"...Stop this," he said.

Mikoto's expression disappeared for just an instant, but it was back in the very next instant.

"Stop what? Don't tell me you're stupid enough to try to keep me, the Mikoto-chan who kicks vending machines for drinks, from going out at night."

Misaka Mikoto responded with her suspiciously normal behavior.

"Just stop this. I know about Misaka Imouto, I know about the Sisters, I know about the experiment, and I know about Accelerator. So let's cut the crap."

Kamijou pulled out a pile of papers.

It was that insane report printed on over twenty pieces of copy paper.

"....."

In that instant, the "normal" Misaka Mikoto was smashed to pieces.

She probably had no idea how the muscles in her face were moving as her cheek's seemed to convulse.

Kamijou felt a stab of pain in his chest.

He had likely destroyed something that she had been trying to protect at all costs.

Even so, he tried to continue on.

"Ahh, why did you do something like this?" she said as if trying to get in his way. "If you have that report, you must have gone into my room without permission. To even search through the stuffed bear, you must be even more persistent than someone's sister-in-law. Y'know, you may think I should be thankful that you've gone so far into this that you can't see anything else around you, but normally you'd be executed for something like that."

Mikoto was speaking casually with a smile like usual.

That smile that looked like she was freed of something pained Kamijou even further.

"So can I ask you one thing?"

Mikoto's bright voice sounded mostly forced.

"What is it?" Kamijou responded almost reflexively.

“After seeing that, were you worried about me? Or could you not forgive me?” she said in her oddly bright voice.

Kamijou was oddly irritated by the way she seemed to be assuming he had come to blame her and assuming that there was no one in the world who would worry for her.

“...Of course I was worried about you.”

Mikoto looked slightly surprised at his almost crushingly low voice.

“Well, I suppose at least having someone who will say that even if it’s a lie is better than nothing.”

Mikoto smiled.

Her eyes looked like she had given up on something and was now looking at some distant dream.

“...I wasn’t lying.”

The words came mostly reflexively from Kamijou’s mouth.

“What?”

Mikoto frowned.

“I said I wasn’t lying!”

Kamijou’s yell made Mikoto jump even more than it did the cowardly black cat.

For some reason, Kamijou simply could not allow Mikoto to have that look on her face.

That was why he continued forward.

“I apologize for going to your room without permission. I did get permission from your roommate, but I suppose that isn’t good enough. Anyway, you can just biri biri me to your heart’s content later. So what are you doing? I doubt you got this report through any proper means. And there’s this map in there with it. They’re all laboratories researching a certain disease, but what’s with the red X’s written over them? They almost look like...”

Kamijou fell silent.

“They almost look like kill marks?” Mikoto responded quietly while looking at Kamijou.

Her voice was shockingly lacking in emotion.

Her transparent voice was enough to give a chill to anyone who knew her well enough.

The cat at Mikoto's feet looked up at her in dissatisfaction.

"That's pretty much it. Of course, I didn't just go in and blow them up with my Railgun." Mikoto almost seemed to be singing. "There are pieces of equipment in those labs that cost hundreds of millions of yen, right? I just used my power over the network to thoroughly destroy them. Without working equipment, the labs can't function, so they close and the project becomes permanently frozen."

She had been almost happily singing, but then she stopped for an instant.

"...Or that was how it was supposed to go."

"How it was supposed to go?"

"Yes. It was easy enough to destroy one or two labs, but the experiment was then picked up by another lab. No matter how many times I destroyed the lab or got in the way, the experiment continued on and continued on. The idea of the never before-seen Level 6 must truly sound wonderful to those researchers."

The girl's voice sounded truly exhausted.

She seemed to have the despair of one who had lived for a thousand years and seen all the darkness of mankind.

"...Those girls have no problem referring to themselves as experimental animals," Mikoto said. "Experimental animals. Do you know how rats or guinea pigs are treated?" She seemed to be gritting her teeth. "I was curious, so I looked into it, but it's horrible. While still alive and without being given any anesthetic, they have holes opened up in their skulls with saws and then have data taken on what happens when drugs are directly applied to their brains. Each and every day, records are kept on how many milliliters of the drug it takes before they cough of blood and die in agony. If they might run low on supplies, they just put the males and females together to breed and if they have leftovers after the experiment is over, they just toss them as is into a furnace."

Mikoto's throat moved as if she were suppressing the urge to vomit.

"Those girls fully understand what an experimental animal is. They know, but they are still calmly able to say that's what they are."

Mikoto bit her lip because she simply couldn't stand that.

She bit down so hard that red blood flowed out because she couldn't stand it but she couldn't find a way to stop it.

“But you have this report, right? If you hand this over to Anti-Skill, won’t the board of directors or someone do something to stop it? Isn’t the cloning of humans against international law?”

With the Curriculum that involved injecting drugs into kids and the development of rockets using original technology, Academy City did some crazy things, but they still managed to follow the law even if just barely.

Given that, an experiment that clearly violated law like that one involving twenty thousand clones used as experimental subjects to be killed would be unthinkable. If that information leaked out, the forces opposed to Academy City would use it to crush the city.

Yet Mikoto held an expression that seemed to say “What are you talking about?”

“That experiment may be wrong on a human level, but it is right on a scientific level. Even if it breaks the law and leads to the loss of their humanity, it is still an experiment that should be carried out.”

“The hell it is! How can you say something that stupid!?”

“Yes, it is stupid. But don’t you find it odd? This city is constantly under surveillance from a satellite. No matter how hard you try to hide, you can’t escape that eye in the sky.”

Kamijou was left speechless.

In other words, the board of directors that led Academy City was...

“They’re in on it. And of course, that includes the police of this city, Anti-Skill and Judgment. They hold the law of this city in their hands, so reporting it will only get you captured,” said Mikoto as she looked down to the cat at her feet.

She gritted her teeth as if bearing with something.

“...This is wrong,” Kamijou said as if coughing up blood.

Rules were meant to bind people in order to protect people. If they were turning a blind eye to people being killed and binding those who stood up to save those people, the rules were completely backwards.

Mikoto smiled slightly as she looked at Kamijou.

She looked like an exhausted adult smiling at a child who understood nothing.

“Yes, it is wrong. It’s wrong to try to rely on anyone else. I caused this problem, so I need to take responsibility and save those girls myself.”

"..."

Kamijou fell silent.

Mikoto slightly bent her small lips.

"If you think about it, it's quite simple. This experiment is meant to make Accelerator stronger. In that case, it's so simple. If they lose Accelerator, the experiment will fall apart."

Mikoto was saying that she would kill Accelerator herself.

Even if she stained her own hands with the crime of murder, she would save the remaining ten thousand Sisters.

"You're lying," was Kamijou's simple reply.

Mikoto looked surprised and Kamijou continued.

"I already told you to cut the crap. You can't defeat Accelerator. After all, you would have done that first if you could. You start biri biri-ing me just because you get a little mad, so I doubt you would keep quiet after all this."

"..."

"Destroying labs or informing the board of directors just seemed too roundabout for you. You're the type who goes and gets into a fight with someone you don't like. You aren't the type to search for evidence and then go tell the teacher." Kamijou took a breath. "Since you didn't do things that way, it means you wanted to but you couldn't. Maybe there's just too much of a difference in strength between you and Accelerator so you don't stand a chance against him."

Even without that reasoning, Kamijou doubted Mikoto could kill Accelerator.

Misaka Mikoto was standing up because she couldn't allow the Sisters to die.

Someone like that would not consider it okay to kill someone else in order to stop someone from dying.

"That's how I know. If you aren't trying to solve this in a straight fight then it means the other guy is better than you. So why didn't you ask for help? If you knew you couldn't solve this on your own, you could have just asked someone else to help you, right?"

Mikoto fell silent for a bit at Kamijou's words.

Not even the sound of the wind could be heard on that iron bridge at night.

The only sound in the silence was the cat mewing longingly.

"...If he kills 128 Railguns, Accelerator can shift to Level 6," Mikoto muttered in the darkness.

Kamijou frowned.

"However, we cannot prepare 128 Railguns."

Mikoto sounded like she was reciting those words in isolation.

"So we prepared twenty thousand Sisters, the deteriorated copies of Railgun."

Mikoto's tongue glided along as she seemed to be speaking of some enjoyable dream.

"*What if I did not have that much value*?"

Kamijou's breath caught in his throat.

"What if I could make the researchers think that he would not reach Level 6 even if he killed 128 of me?" She smiled as she spoke. "According to Tree Diagram, if Accelerator and I were to fight, I would be killed after 185 moves even if I focused on fleeing. But what if the battle ended sooner than that? What if I lost on the very first move and could do nothing but pathetically turn tail and attempt to flee?"

As she said that, she smiled as if she were truly enjoying herself.

"When the researchers saw that, I'm sure they would think that Tree Diagram's calculations were wonderful, but that it was still wrong."

A battered smile appeared on her face.

"..."

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

Even if the laboratory in which the experiment was being carried out was destroyed, it would not matter as the experiment would just be picked up by another laboratory. To stop them, they would have to be convinced that the experiment itself was meaningless and not worth continuing.

That was why Mikoto intended to take on Accelerator and purposefully lose.

Even if it was a bluff or an act, she intended to make the researchers think the simulation on which the experiment was based was false.

She planned to do so even if it cost her her life.

But...

“What meaning does that have? Even if you fool the researchers once, they’ll just recalculate everything with Tree Diagram and start the experiment back up when they get the same result!”

The cat trembled in fright at Kamijou’s shout.

But Mikoto’s voice was soft enough to pacify the cat.

“Don’t worry. That won’t happen. Tree Diagram was shot down by some unknown attack from the ground about two weeks ago. The higher ups seem to be hiding that fact to protect their reputation, but they can’t recalculate it.”

Kamijou had no memories and Mikoto had not been there, but a white nun had used a dragon attack to slice the satellite in two.

“Ha. It’s actually kind of funny. Everyone talking about the forecasted calculations is acting based on data Tree Diagram calculated out months ago.”

Kamijou recalled what Mikoto had said in the evening.

“*–I hate that blimp*.”

“*–...Because people follow the policies decided on by a machine*.”

“But that also means this is my only chance. Right now while Tree Diagram cannot be used to recalculate anything, all those third rate people just have to accept what it said because they can’t analyze what parts of all that data are correct and what parts are wrong. That is why they will have no choice but to stop the entire experiment if a mistake appears in a portion of the data. It’s just like a program being forcibly terminated when a strange bug occurs.”

That was all that girl could do.

She was throwing her life aside to save someone. She could not be a proper hero and defeat the enemy or stand in front of someone to protect them.

She was doing the one thing she could do.

She could only cast aside her own life in order to make the researchers think their correct answer was incorrect.

"..."

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

Even with that bluff, there was no guarantee that it would work. If the researchers realized that Mikoto was "acting", it was all over. And it was even possible that they would continue with the experiment despite determining that the calculations were wrong.

Even so, that was all she could do.

The only other option for her was to pray to god that the experiment would be stopped.

"I see," Kamijou said.

He wasn't quite sure what emotion he was feeling.

"So you're planning to die."

"Yes," Mikoto nodded.

"You truly believe that your death will save the remaining ten thousand Sisters."

"Yes," Mikoto nodded.

Mikoto took one step to face Kamijou.

"Now that you know that, get out of the way. I am about to go face Accelerator. I've already stolen the data on the locations of the twenty thousand battlefields, so I can head to the battlefield before the Sister begins fighting and end all the fighting. So get out of the way."

"..."

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

That may truly have been the only way left of stopping the experiment and saving the Sisters. There were problems in the world that could not be solved through fighting. Imagine Breaker and Railgun were nothing more than extensions of childish fights. They were simply powerless before the power of the type of organization that made up the society of adults.

If she wanted to stop that experiment, to stand up to the society of adults, her death may have been the only way.

Kamijou continued to grit his teeth.

He recalled Misaka Imouto in the back of his mind. She had freely gathered the scattered drinks and gotten the fleas off of the cat, but she was so defenseless and had been bothered by the fact that she made cats hate her. She had done nothing wrong, but she would still be killed. That fact made him grit his teeth even harder.

“I won’t get out of the way.”

Mikoto looked at Kamijou in what looked like utter shock.

“You...won’t get out of the way?”

“That’s right,” he said as he stood there.

After hearing what Mikoto had said, he could not move out of her way.

However, Mikoto could not accept that.

Her lips trembled in anger and she had an expression of disbelief on her face.

“What are you saying? Do you know what you’re saying? If I don’t die, ten thousand Sisters will die. Or are you saying you have another way? Don’t tell me you don’t care about their deaths just because they’re deteriorated copies...”

The cat could not understand human language, but it trembled upon hearing Mikoto’s words.

Of course Kamijou understood.

He did not think it was okay for ten thousand Sisters to die. Nor did he have any other plan. He also understood that ten thousand Sisters truly would be killed like lab rats if Mikoto did not die.

Just as Mikoto had said, he had no idea what he was saying.

“...Even so, I won’t let you.”

Kamijou did not know the details of Mikoto’s situation, but she was willing to cast aside her own life to save the Sisters. He did not want to see a peace created by having a girl who cared more about others than herself being killed all alone like that.

“...”

For an instant, just an instant, a surprised look appeared on Mikoto’s face.

That look was quickly replaced with anger.

“I see. So you’re going to stop me. So you don’t care about the lives of ten thousand Sisters.”

Tension ran through the air.

The cat at Mikoto’s feet placed its ears against its head in fear.

“I don’t want to see those girls hurt, so I want to protect them myself. ...If you are going to stop me from doing so, then I will take you out here. This is your final warning. Get out of the way.”

Kamijou merely shook his head.

The edges of Mikoto’s lips bent upward.

“Ha. So you’re going to stop me by force? Fine, then I won’t hold back either. I still don’t know what power you have, but I can’t allow myself to lose here, so you had better clench your fist as if your life depended on it.”

Bluish-white sparks flew from Mikoto’s shoulder.

“Because it does. You truly will die otherwise.”

The sparks poured out and connected to the railing of the bridge where they vanished. The cat moved away from Mikoto because of the noise of the sparks.

There were only seven meters between Kamijou and Mikoto.

That distance was too great for Kamijou to reach her in one step, but it was well within the range of Mikoto’s electrical attacks that moved at the speed of light.

It was obvious at a glance who had the advantage and who had the disadvantage given the distance.

Words would likely no longer reach the girl before his eyes.

As such, there was only one way to stop her.

“...”

Kamijou stuck his right hand out horizontally.

He opened up his clenched fist. It was as if he were removing a seal on his right hand. Mikoto’s eyes narrowed slightly. Kamijou gritted his teeth so hard he thought his jaw would shatter and...

He did not remake a fist with his right hand.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Mikoto said as Kamijou continued to remain motionless.

He did not respond.

Mikoto grew enraged as if she could not allow him to act that way.

“...I told you to fight, didn’t I!? I told you that you have to use force if you’re going to stop me! Are you an idiot!? Even if you stand there without resisting, I’ll still take you out!”

Mikoto’s hate-filled words were fired from her mouth like bullets.

Kamijou said only one thing in response.

“...I won’t.”

“...? What are you saying...?”

Mikoto frowned slightly.

“*I won’t fight*.”

She froze in astonishment at his words.

She stared at him like she was looking at something she simply could not believe.

“Are you an idiot!? Hah! You really are an idiot! This is the only path for me left, so I *will* take you out even if I do trust you! What kind of lukewarm world do you think we live in? This is not the normal life you know. This is an abnormal hell colored in blood, flesh, bone, fat, and guts where ten thousand people have already been killed. That kind of peaceful view isn’t going to cut it.”

“Even so, *I will not fight*!!”

Mikoto disparaged him as if hell had opened its mouth, but Kamijou’s shout silenced her.

Kamijou held up his left hand horizontally to match his right hand. He expressed his lack of any intention of fighting as if he were a cross blocking the way.

“Dammit. I’m telling you to fight...”

Mikoto’s shoulders trembled.

The sparks electrifying her entire body were no longer contained within and more and more bluish-white snakes of electricity started arcing from her and into the railing or the ground.

Even so, Kamijou did not clench his fist.

He didn't want to.

Kamijou stood before her because he was worried for her safety. He wanted to stop her because she was trying to head somewhere dangerous all alone. He stood there because that battered girl was not asking for help even in the very end and he did not want to see her wishing for a lonely death and because he did not want to see her hurt any more.

Even so, he could not turn his fist toward her.

Kamijou could not punch Mikoto.

Bluish-white electricity scattered from her entire body.

"...I'm telling you to fight!!"

In that instant, an electric spear appeared from Mikoto's bangs.

The largest voltage of the lightning created in nature was one billion volts.

Mikoto could rival that.

That sublime spear of purple electricity that contained one billion volts glowed a bluish-white. The electrical spear decomposed the oxygen turning it to ozone as it flew the seven meters to Kamijou in an instant.

With a great noise, the electrical spear soared just past Kamijou's face.

"I really will hit you next time." Mikoto gritted her teeth. "If you intend to fight, then clench your fist! If you don't intend to fight, then get out of the way! Don't stomp on my wish if you don't intend to follow through!"

With an incredible roar, sparks flew from Mikoto's bangs.

An electrical spear flew straight for Kamijou Touma's heart.

Mikoto's attack seemed to be urging him to clench his fist.

Even so, Kamijou did not clench his right hand.

He did not want to swing his fist at the girl before his eyes.

And that electrical spear struck Kamijou directly in the heart.

Part 3

Kamijou's body was knocked to the ground like he had been hit by a shell. His momentum kept him rolling for a few meters. As he lay face down on the ground with his arms and legs roughly sticking at, he looked somewhat like a broken doll.

"Eh?"

The one most shocked by the scene was Mikoto, not Kamijou.

Mikoto did not know what Kamijou's power was, but in their fights up to that point, not one of her attacks had hit him. As his unknown power had negated her attacks again and again, her attacks had escalated and escalated to the point that she had seen him as an invincible existence that could easily handle any attack.

That was why she had fired that lightning spear.

She had thought that boy would easily negate an attack like that.

In a twisted way, she had trusted him.

"But..."

(This has to be a mistake...)

Mikoto looked at the boy who lay atop the bridge. Mikoto knew very well what would happen to a human who received an electrical current of one billion volts. That boy would not stand back up. She knew that. She had done it. She knew that.

And yet...

An instant later, she saw a movement coming from that boy who should never have stood up again.

Gritting his teeth, the boy mustered all his strength and stood back up.

"Why...?" Mikoto said.

Her lightning attack had not been negated by Kamijou's power. It had clearly struck him. Yet that boy stood back up without relying on any power and using only his own body.

And even after receiving that one billion volt attack, the boy did not clench his fist.

That was why Mikoto had muttered "why" in shock.

"...I don't know." Kamijou gritted his teeth. "I don't know why I don't want to fight. I don't have some other idea! But I still don't want to see you get hurt! Not even I know what I'm saying! But I can't help it! I don't want to turn my fist on you!"

"Wha-...?" Mikoto was at a loss for words.

The boy yelled as if he were about to cough up blood as he desperately kept his feet planted on the ground because his body seemed about to collapse.

"Even if there is no other way!! Even if I don't know what else to do! I still can't let that happen! Why do you have to die!? Why does anyone have to be killed!? I just can't understand!"

That boy surely realized that his words would not reach Mikoto.

Even so, he yelled.

He likely had no real reason.

He understood her reasons, but he still had something he refused to give up on.

"..."

For an instant, just an instant, Mikoto bit her lip.

A certain girl had once muttered "help" so that no one would hear her.

That boy had appeared as if in response to her cry.

She was sure that boy would be able to carry out any miracle if she cried for help.

"But I can't let that happen," Misaka Mikoto muttered under her breath.

It was her own fault that over ten thousand Sisters had been killed.

She absolutely could not allow herself to rely on others to save them.

"Shut up," Mikoto said moving her trembling lips. "I no longer have the right to have people say that to me. Even if there was some happy world that everyone wanted and in which everyone could smile, there would be no place for me there! So get out of the way!"

Sparks flew from Mikoto's bangs.

She was sure that the boy would either give up and clench his fist or move out of her way that time.

But he would not clench his fist no matter what.

At that point, she could no longer control the lightning spear as it pierced the boy's chest.

There was a tremendous roar.

But the boy did not die. He did not even collapse to the ground. He gathered all his strength in his legs and continued to stand in her way despite being so battered.

"...I'm sure...you've realized it, too. You can't save anyone this way. Even if you die...and save the ten thousand Sisters...do you really think they will thank you for saving them that way? Are the Sisters you want to save really that small minded?"

"Shut up! Just shut up and fight! I'm not the good person you think I am! Why can't you realize that even as I fire these one billion volt lightning spears into you!?"

As if to threaten him, Mikoto fired another electrical spear.

But Kamijou did not clench his right hand. The spear struck him directly in the chest.

Even so, Kamijou did not fall.

Even after receiving an attack like that, he would not fall.

"I have killed over ten thousand people! There is no reason for a villain like that to live in this world! Why are you standing up for a villain like that!?"

"You aren't a villain," Kamijou said.

Mikoto frowned doubtfully.

"Why am I still alive?"

"Eh?"

"You said these attacks had one billion volts. A normal human cannot survive voltages that high. Don't you find it odd? Or are you subconsciously holding back?"

"Holding back?" Mikoto had a bewildered look on her face. "Of course not. I was trying to kill you. I knew you weren't resisting...I knew you wouldn't resist...and yet...!"

"And yet you couldn't kill me."

"..."

Mikoto fell silent.

He was right. Normally, a human would not survive voltages as high as one billion volts.

But there was an exception.

For instance, commercial stun guns had voltages of two or three hundred thousand volts, but a human would not die from being hit by one. On the other hand, one-hundred-volt household outlets could electrocute someone.

That was not caused by the voltage. It was due to the difference in amperage. The amount of electrical power was equal to the voltage multiplied by the amperage, so one would not be electrocuted even with extremely high voltages as long as the amperage was low.

In other words, Mikoto's lightning spears had extremely high voltage but extremely low amperage.

It was as if her attacks were just for show and did not possess any real substance like a fake sword for a play.

However, Mikoto had not intended to hold back. She had meant to fire her spears at full blast. That was why she merely stared at Kamijou without knowing why it had happened.

As she trembled like the frightened kitten, Kamijou looked her in the eye.

"For you, saving the Sisters with your life may have been your final hope," the battered boy said. "But in the end, you are still the kind of good person who cannot kill the guy who is trying to steal that final remaining hope from you."

As he spoke, he seemed completely exhausted but he also smiled happily.

"Ah...uuh..." Mikoto muttered in confusion as she looked at Kamijou.

Her eyes wavered like a small child who was lost.

Misaka Mikoto did not want Kamijou Touma to get any more involved in the experiment.

That was why she had so easily spoken of its repulsive contents when he had brought it up. She had wanted Kamijou to despair upon hearing about it. She had fired her electrical attacks on him despite his lack of resistance because she had wanted him to give up because he believed his words could not get through to her.

If Kamijou were to lose hope in her, he would not follow her and end up getting involved in that experiment that was nothing more than a spiral of death.

"Stop this."

Mikoto grabbed her head with both hands.

Even so, Kamijou had told her to stop. No matter what terrible things she said to him or how cruelly she attacked him, he did not care.

At that rate, the boy would get involved.

He would cross the point of no return and get involved with that abnormal world of spiraling blood and dirt.

“My death is the only way left to save those girls! So just accept it! If I die, I can save everyone! Isn’t that wonderful!? If you agree, then get out of the way!”

Mikoto covered her ears with her hands and clenched her eyes shut as she yelled.

Even so, she felt like she could hear the boy saying he would not get out of the way.

“...You’ll die,” Mikoto said with her eyes still shut. “There’s no saving you from here on! If you get hit by this next attack, there’s no way you’ll survive! So get out of the way if you don’t want to die!”

The sound of the purple sparks flowing from Mikoto’s body grew heavier and sharper.

As if some kind of weapon had been activated, the pitch rose and rose.

“...”

Even so, the boy did not move a single step.

It was as if he were saying that an attack like that was not a reason to fall back.

Mikoto bit her lip.

A bluff would not work on that boy.

If she did not actually fire a deadly attack, she could not get him to give up.

If he knew she was not bluffing, that boy would have to fight.

Even so, she heard him yelling that he would not get out of the way.

Mikoto finally could not stand it any longer and she yelled out.

A great flash seemed to pierce through her tightly closed eyelids. A great roar burst through her hands covering her ears. That was not a decorative high voltage attack that had low amperage. She fired a true lightning spear that was just like the real thing.

Amid that lightless and soundless flash, the sound of a direct hit resounded out like a fireworks factory exploding.

Even so, the boy did not clench his right hand even in the very end.

In the end, that was all there was to it.

Part 4

Mikoto timidly opened her eyes and saw the boy lying on the ground a few meters away.

He was motionlessly lying face down and thin smoke was floating up from his clothes in places like incense. Just like how video game consoles grew hot after using them for long periods of time, objects gained heat referred to as Joule heat when electricity was passed through them.

The great amount of Joule heat created by the high voltage current had given the boy light burns in various places.

However, the boy did not writhe around in pain due to the burns.

“Ah...”

Mikoto suddenly realized that it was over.

That time, the boy would not get up again. That had not been a fake attack. The true high voltage current had likely stopped the boy’s heart.

She heard the black cat mewing.

Mikoto unsteadily turned around and saw the utterly frightened kitten sitting a little bit away.

Its fur was not standing on end and its fangs and claws were not bared.

Its young eyes seemed to be asking her why she had done that.

“Ahh...”

Mikoto suddenly realized something upon seeing that black cat.

In the end, what Mikoto had done to that boy was no different from suddenly attacking that cute cat that immediately trusted people and rubbed its nose up against them.

That boy had actually had a few different options.

After reading the report, he could have hidden it and returned to a normal life.

Even if he chose to stop Mikoto, he could have hidden the fact that he had read the report so she would not be suspicious of him and then waited for her to turn her back on him so he could strike her on the back of the head to knock her out.

But that boy had not done either of those things.

He had revealed that he had gone into her room without permission and read the report and he had told her he did not want her to fight. He had revealed everything and still tried to stop Mikoto head on.

What he had done was like playing poker with his entire hand exposed to the other players.

It was like announcing beforehand that he was going to play scissors first in a game of rock-paper-scissors.

Why had he done something so dangerous?

If he had betrayed Mikoto's trust and suddenly attacked her from behind, it could have all ended safely.

"..."

The answer to that was obvious.

Mikoto had trusted that boy. At the very least, she had seen the area around him as a type of safe zone because he knew nothing of the experiment.

He had been like a cat curled up asleep in a sunbeam.

That boy had not been able to stab Mikoto in the back. Even if that was the safest and most reliable course of action, he had not wanted to.

She had pointed a gun at that boy, but he had still not wanted any harm to befall her.

He believed that it could be resolved by talking it out rather than resorting to violence.

But she had pulled the trigger before his words could reach her.

"..."

Mikoto gritted her teeth.

There was nothing left to stop her. A thin string within Mikoto that was something like resignation snapped, she felt as if she had been freed of something. She felt like she had been given a freedom that held definitive destruction within it like a balloon flying off into the sky after its string broke.

Kamijou's finger moved.

"!?"

Mikoto froze up upon seeing that.

As he lay face down, Kamijou's right hand twitched. His finger moved slowly as if softly caressing the ground.

That was not the action of one wanting revenge upon the person who had done that to him.

Nor was it the action of one filled with fear and wanting to flee the area as soon as possible.

From the very start, the boy had said that he would not fight and that he did not want to fight.

That persistence was nothing more than a desire to reach out a saving hand to a girl who had cried out for help.

"...Why?" Mikoto muttered.

Just reading the report did not tell him everything about her situation. He did not know that she had handed over her DNA map to help with a muscular dystrophy treatment, that the map had ended up being used for a military purpose at some point, or that her desire to save people had led to twenty thousand people being faced with death.

That boy had no way of knowing about those things.

But he stood up for Mikoto despite not knowing those things.

He stood up for her.

But...

"Stop," Mikoto said like a child about to cry as she shook her head.

If he stood up again, she would have to take him out in order to save the Sisters. Of course, she could hold back, but it was already strange that the boy was still moving. Even a slight almost playful strike could stop his heart.

“Stop.”

That was why she said that.

She did not want the boy to stand back up. If he was alive, then he should just pass out there. If he did, Mikoto could head to where Accelerator was without having to kill the boy.

If that boy would give up on her, she would not have to hurt anyone again.

If that boy would lose hope in her, he would be freed from that pain.

Yet the boy’s finger moved.

He could no longer move his body properly, but he mustered up every last ounce of strength in his body to move that one finger.

“Ahh.”

Mikoto slowly held her hand out toward the boy.

She was sure she could no longer stop him. Even if she ripped off his arms and legs and even if she crushed his eyes and ears, he would never give up as long as his heart was still beating. That meant she had no choice but to do it. If that boy would prevent her from saving the Sisters, she had to eliminate him before she could continue.

Mikoto slowly steadied the aim of her hand.

However, she could not shoot a lighting spear.

Her body was frozen, but heat burst from her tear glands.

She couldn’t do it. She could not shoot that boy. She did not know why. She did not know what the right answer was. But she just did not want to. She did not want the boy before her eyes to die. Just thinking of that possibility sent a shock through her chest that made her want to go on a rampage.

“Help me.”

Those words that she could not allow anyone to hear no matter what came from her mouth.

It was like she was praying to the god that she was not sure existed.

Her tear glands were supposed to have rusted over long ago, but now transparent rust fell from them.

Part 5

Kamijou's vision flickered in and out.

He was still lying atop the iron bridge and he could see Mikoto standing blankly on the other end of his vision.

Her electrical attacks had stopped.

Mikoto stood still as tears overflowed from her eyes like a child.

(Think...)

He thought as if he were desperately trying to hold her heart in his arms as it was about to break.

The girl before his eyes had not said that she wanted to die or that she might as well die. She had said that she *had no choice but to die*.

That was all.

She did not wish for death. She merely had no other option available to her.

If you were given three options and forced to choose one but they all merely said "suicide", you would have no choice but to choose "suicide". It was horribly wrong to force that choice on that girl and then force all the responsibility for her choice on her as well.

(So think...)

If all three options said "suicide", then you just had to prepare a fourth option. If there were an option that said "I'd rather live", the girl who *had no choice but to die* would surely choose that new option.

(I need to think up a fourth option...)

He needed to come up with a dreamlike option where Misaka Mikoto did not have to die and the experiment would still be stopped. An option where no one had to lose anything and the Sisters would be saved. That girl had said something. She had not said it with words, but she had definitely said it.

She had said that she truly wanted to live, but she had no path left but to die.

(If I can't find one, then I'll just have to make on...)

If Accelerator killed Railgun 128 times, he would shift to Level 6.

They could not prepare 128 Railguns.

As such, they had prepared the Sisters, deteriorated copies of Railgun.

Killing twenty thousand Sisters would produce the same result.

The experiment was based on predictive calculations by Tree Diagram.

Destroying the laboratories just led to another research institution picking up the experiment.

To stop the experiment, the researchers had to be convinced that the experiment would not produce any results.

(Huh...?)

Kamijou felt an odd out-of-place feeling.

But in the next instant, his consciousness that had been battered by the high voltage shock quickly sank into darkness.

CHAPTER 4

Accelerator.

Level5(Extend).

Part 1

As the night grew deeper, the cold grew sharper. Despite it being the middle of summer, she felt a chill like a cold blade being pressed up against her stomach.

Serial Number 10032 aka Misaka Imouto left a shopping district and walked with an accurate, machine-like pace toward a section of a silent industrial area.

As she walked along the empty street lined with street lights, Misaka Imouto mentally went over the contents of the experiment about to begin.

The absolute coordinates of the area to be used were X-228561, Y-568714. The start time was at exactly 8:30 PM Japanese Standard Time. The specimen to be used was #10032. The purpose was to find a way to fight so that the usage of reflection would not apply.

"..."

Misaka Imouto ran mentally through the scenario in which she was to be killed, but no tragic expression appeared on her face. There was no fear, no hatred, and not even resignation on her face.

Her face truly was expressionless.

If someone had seen that, they would sense the same danger as watching a clockwork doll heading for the edge of a cliff.

Misaka Imouto was not a deviant that did not know the value of a living being's life.

If someone had been about to die before her, she would have immediately searched for options she could take and then taken action on the most suitable one.

However, she could not apply that concept to herself.

As if it were information being written on a hard disk, her empty heart had been installed by a Testament onto her physical body that could be remade as many times as needed at the push of a button using the proper equipment. The value of her life was 180,000 yen. She was like a high performance personal computer. In fact, she was the type that would get thrown into the bargain box.

(...That is why there is one thing Misaka does not understand, thinks Misaka.)

Misaka Imouto had that thought as she walked down the dark street.

When that boy had run into multiple Misakas in that back alley, he had been so shocked he had stopped breathing. It had been like a reality he could not stand was being thrust before his eyes. It had been like he did not want to accept that reality even if it was thrust before his eyes.

Misaka Imouto recalled what that boy had said.

"*–Who are you*?"

Those words had not been a question he asked her.

"*–What are you doing*?"

It had seemed more like he had asked the question because he wanted her to deny something.

Misaka Imouto's face remained expressionless.

(Did he really want to deny it that badly?)

Had he really wanted to deny the reality of the twenty thousand Sisters, and the world in which their hearts stopping was all according to plan that badly?

(...Misaka does not understand. Misaka cannot understand, thinks Misaka as she addressed her questions related to the boy's mental state.)

Misaka Imouto concluded that there was no point in thinking about things there was no way she could understand.

It was as if she were saying there was no real problem in not understanding why a frog would swim in a ditch.

But then...

Why had she recalled that boy's face?

If there was truly no value in it, she would not have thought of him. There was no reason to recall the shape and color of the gum that was stuck to the station platform a week before.

She was supposed to be assembling information in her head for the upcoming experiment. If she failed, it would cause problems for a lot of people, so why had her thoughts drifted to that boy's face when he had nothing to do with the experiment?

"..."

Misaka Imouto could not understand.

And she had concluded that there was no point in thinking about things there was no way she could understand.

Misaka Imouto could not even understand something as trivial and pointless as that.

The girl headed alone to her own place of execution while still understanding none of it.

Her precise footsteps sounded like the ticking of a time bomb.

Part 2

Kamijou was lying on his side atop the windless iron bridge.

He slowly opened his eyes. Most likely, it had not been long since he had been hit by that high voltage current and lost consciousness. It had probably only been ten or twenty seconds, but his sprawled out arms and legs were oddly cold. The proper circulation of blood had been obstructed. The electric shock may have made the beating of his heart irregular or his heart may have actually stopped once or twice while he was unconscious.

Without moving his head, Kamijou blankly stared at his limbs that looked like they belonged to a doll that had been thrown into a corner of the room by a child who had gotten tired of it.

"..."

He tried to move his fingers and his index finger slowly moved like a dying insect. He managed to move his eyelids and blink. He was sucking in and blowing out terribly shallow breaths and he could hear the faint beating of his heart coming from within his body.

"Thank goodness," he mouthed.

He could still move his body. That meant he could stand back up.

“What are you doing?” said a girl’s voice from very close by above his head.

Kamijou suddenly realized that there was an oddly soft feeling on his cheek as he lay on his side.

It seemed his head was lying in Mikoto’s lap.

“You’re that beaten up, you’re lying on the filthy ground, and your heart may have even stopped for a short time. So...”

Her voice was trembling.

That was not the voice of one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s, of a Tokiwadai lady, or of Railgun. It was the voice of a normal girl who could not stop trembling in the darkness.

“...How can you smile like that?”

Transparent drops of liquid fell on Kamijou’s cheek from above.

They were warm like a spring rain.

“...”

“Thank goodness,” he mouthed again without actually speaking.

He was glad that he could be Mikoto’s ally. His eyes narrowed slightly in happiness.

The black cat mewed next to his ear.

Its rough tongue touched Kamijou’s hand as if to kindly lick his wounds.

“I’ve figured it out,” he said while still lying there.

Mikoto did not respond. He only heard a rubbing sound as if she were wiping at her eyes with her fingertips.

“...I’ve figured out how to stop the experiment.”

He heard a slight sound from Mikoto’s throat as if her breath had caught there in surprise.

“If you think about it, it’s quite simple.”

The entire experiment was just the researchers following the scenario created by Tree Diagram.

That was why Mikoto had been thinking of stopping the experiment by making the researchers think that scenario would not work.

If something that simple could stop the experiment, then it was quite simple indeed.

"...I'm sure Tree Diagram took the fact that Accelerator is the strongest in Academy City into account for its calculations."

If the experiment could be stopped by having them believe in a bluff, then...

"Then it's simple. We just have to make the researchers think that this Accelerator they insist is the strongest *is actually really absurdly weak*."

What if Accelerator, supposedly Academy City's strongest esper, were to easily lose in a simple street fight?

Even if the simulations said he was Academy City's strongest, would the researchers really continue to believe Accelerator was the strongest after seeing something as pathetic as that?

Wouldn't that make the researchers think the machine's predictions were wrong?

"That's not possible," Mikoto replied. "The experiment can't be stopped so simply. I'm a Level 5 just like him. If another Level 5 defeats him, I'm sure they'll just accept it as within the accepted margin of error. They won't think that Accelerator is actually weak."

Mikoto sounded like she was gritting her teeth and like she was oozing blood.

"And we can't beat him even if we ganged up on him." Mikoto seemed to be reflecting on her own powerlessness. "I've only directly met this Accelerator once, but that was enough. I hacked into the Bank and did a search on his power and it gave me goose bumps. A fight for him is not something he might win or lose. When he fights, it is a completely one-sided slaughter."

"..."

Kamijou knew she was right.

Tree Diagram had already determined that she would be killed in 185 moves if she were to fight Accelerator. That was surely an accurate answer. Even if Misaka Mikoto used everything at her disposal and tried her very best, she could not defeat Accelerator. That was why that strong and usually impulsive girl had not tried to take him out in a fight and had instead been cornered in a situation where her death was the only way to stop the experiment and save the Sisters.

Kamijou knew that Misaka Mikoto could not defeat Accelerator.

“That just means I have to fight.”

Mikoto’s breath caught in her throat because Kamijou’s words had shocked her to the bottom of her heart.

But that was the only way.

Even if another Level 5 defeated Accelerator, the researchers would not be convinced that he was actually weak.

But what if Academy City’s strongest were defeated by one of Academy City’s weakest, a Level 0?

Of course, it may have looked like Kamijou was a strong esper who had merely flown under the radar, but Academy City’s System Scan had thoroughly checked him over and he still could not get rid of being branded a Level 0. That was just what Kamijou Touma’s Imagine Breaker was.

If Accelerator were easily defeated by someone who was seen as a Level 0 no matter how much one checked him over, what would those researchers think of their supposed strongest?

“…”

Now that he knew what he had to do, the rest was easy.

Kamijou tried to lift his head from Mikoto’s thighs and stand up, but his body would not move as he wanted it to. He felt a slight scraping feeling and his head slid from her thighs down to the hard ground.

Even so, he gritted his teeth and moved his trembling fingers like caterpillars. He slowly, slowly got his fingers gripped on the uneven asphalt and then gathered all his strength to lift himself up from the ground like he was lifting a barbell.

He expended so much effort into just getting up on one knee that he felt like he had shortened his lifespan by five years.

Mikoto let out a trembling voice upon seeing Kamijou gritting his teeth.

“What are you doing?” She spoke like she was seeing something she could not believe. “You can’t. You’re only saying that because you don’t know what Accelerator’s power is! It’s crazy to even think of taking on that kind of overpowered villain that you would see in a manga. He’s the kind of person who would just cackle at the fact that every army in the world was after him!”

"..."

Kamijou did not respond.

He merely remained silent and gathered strength in his legs in order to stand up from being on one knee.

"Accelerator's power is the ability to freely control all kinds of vectors such as motion, heat, and electricity as long as they are touching his skin. You can't find an opening in an overpowered ability like that even if you know what the ability is!" Mikoto seemed to be yelling out at the unfairness of reality. "All of his attacks will reach you, but none of yours will reach him. In fact, everything you fire at him is reflected right back at you. No human can stand up to an absolute one-way road like that!"

"..."

Kamijou did not respond.

He poured all his strength into his trembling knees and tried to stand up.

"He's just different. It's best to think of him as a being on a different dimension from espers like us. You can't win when you take on someone who is cheating from the start. And you're already so beaten up! You can't defeat a monster like that in your state!"

Mikoto begged him as she was about to burst into tears. She begged him to not stand back up.

"..."

Even so, Kamijou did not respond.

He moved his body that was even then about to collapse and slowly, slowly stood up.

"Why?" Mikoto asked in the voice of a child who was lost.

"..."

Kamijou did not know.

He did not know how strong Accelerator was.

He did not know what he could do with his body that battered.

But Imagine Breaker resided in his right hand.

And a reason to clench his right fist existed within his chest.

He would not rely on anyone else and he would not hope for anything else.

If he could use that hand to rescue a girl who had been cornered in a dead end by that Accelerator, then he felt it was a wonderful thing.

So Kamijou stood up.

He stood upon the ground on his own two feet.

“Misaka, you said you were about to head to where Accelerator is, right?”

Kamijou looked at Mikoto’s face.

He had a feeling that he had not seen her eyes in a long time and they were currently red from crying.

“Tell me, Misaka. Where is he about to start the experiment?”

Part 3

Misaka Imouto had arrived at a train switchyard.

Similar to a transit bus garage, it was a place where many trains were serviced and where they were kept after the last train ran. An area about the size of a school’s grounds was covered in the same gravel as a train track and over ten rails were lined up next to each other. Lined up at the end of the tracks were garages with large shutters over them making them look like rental storage areas at a port. Surrounding the entire switchyard were large numbers of metal containers used on freight trains. The containers were piled up like building blocks and they rivaled three story buildings in height. The disorderly piles made the area around the switchyard seem like a three-dimensional maze. The containers were like mountains and the switchyard itself was like the basin between the mountains.

The switchyard was not a popular place.

As all students had to be back from school by the time the last train left, the switchyard was quickly abandoned. The electric lights used for work were turned off and there were no houses nearby so that left no illumination. Even though 2.3 million people lived in that city, that area was wrapped in such darkness that the usually invisible stars were visible in the night sky.

Standing in the middle of that vacant darkness was Academy City’s strongest esper, Accelerator.

His form seemed to be one with the surrounding darkness, so Misaka Imouto felt like she was being thrown into a giant organ belonging to Accelerator by entering that switchyard.

The white boy smiled in the black darkness.

His eerie whiteness gave her the feeling that her eyeballs had been thrown into boiling water.

“So it’s 8:25... I take it you’re the next doll to be targeted in the experiment?”

Accelerator’s voice sounded like a white darkness spewing forth from that smile that split across his face.

But Misaka Imouto’s expression did not change even slightly.

“Yes, Misaka is Serial Number 10032, responds Misaka. However, shouldn’t you check using the passcode to ensure that Misaka is part of the experiment? suggests Misaka.”

“...Tch. You’re fucking insane,” Accelerator spat out. “Well, I may have no right to say this as someone forcing you to take part in this experiment to make me stronger, but you sure are calm. Don’t you feel anything about this situation?”

“It is difficult to understand what you mean when you use vague terms such as ‘anything’, replies Misaka. The experiment begins in three minutes and twenty seconds. Are you prepared? asks Misaka to make sure.”

Accelerator’s eyes narrowed. He chewed on something in his mouth with a look like he was fed up with something. It was like he was chewing on a piece of gum that had lost its sweetness.

“? Are you eating something? asks Misaka.”

“Yeah, *a finger*,” Accelerator said casually as he spat the object in his mouth out to the side.

The piece of meat was all chewed up and had saliva all over it, but the general shape of a girl’s narrow fingertip could just barely still be seen.

“*Since I had the chance*, I thought I’d borrow it, but human flesh isn’t all that great. I’d heard that fingers didn’t have much fat and that it tasted a bit sour, but it’s not even that. You bite into it and you can feel all these narrow bundles being torn apart. It’s fucking horrible. I guess we just didn’t evolve to be eaten like pigs or cows.”

Accelerator wiped his lips with his arm as if to wipe away the flavor in his mouth.

But Misaka Imouto's expression did not change even slightly upon hearing that.

"Normally, pork or beef has the blood removed and the flavor improved with salt and other spices, advises Misaka. Is the distinction between raw meat and cooked meat due to the changes in the proteins created by heating bringing an error into your testing? asks Misaka giving her view on the situation."

"Is that so?" said Accelerator sounding fed up with the entire thing.

Misaka Imouto did not understand why Accelerator had asked that question. It was true that she had been shocked upon seeing him in front of the used bookstore, but that had been because of the black cat at her feet. She was only afraid of having an unrelated life taken by the experiment.

"Dammit, after ten thousand times, this is getting really fucking old. I was hoping to kill some time, but no. There's just no having a conversation with any of you," Accelerator said leisurely. "I can't understand why you would throw away your lives like that. To me, my own life takes top priority and I think of my own body as the best. That's why there's no limit to the amount of power I want and that's why I can just laugh scornfully as I kill hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of you."

"There are parts of what you said that Misaka does not understand, replies Misaka. You are already Academy City's strongest Level 5, are you not? If you are already at a point where no one else can reach you, there should be no need to head even higher, predicts Misaka."

"The strongest, hm?" Accelerator sounded bored as he responded. "Strongest? Strongest!? Strongest!!? True enough. I am the strongest esper in this city and therefore the strongest esper in the entire world. But," Accelerator sounded bored from the very depths of his heart, "in the end, I am *only* the strongest. How does everyone else know that I'm the strongest esper in Academy City? It's because they've fought me and lost. In other words, my strength is only at the level where they try to pick a fight with me because it sounds like fun."

His red eyes completely changed to those of a pleasant smile.

"That's not enough. That's nowhere near enough. Level 5—strongest—is boring. I'm after something beyond that. I want absolute strength that makes the thought of taking me on sound like a fucking joke and doesn't even allow anyone to even think about fighting me. I yearn for that invincibility known as Level 6."

As that boy spoke of his own dream, he slowly stretched his hands out horizontally to both sides.

The right hand of suffering and the left hand of poison.

The boy smiled with his hands held out horizontally. Both were like poisonous snakes that could kill with just a touch.

He looked like a cross emitting darkness.

“So are you ready? It’s time to die, you overproduced failure.”

The white boy smiled mockingly, but Misaka Imouto’s expression did not change even slightly.

She merely spoke unconcernedly like a doll with a clock in it.

“8:29 PM and 45 seconds, 46 seconds, 47 seconds...Experiment #10032 will begin shortly. Test Subject Accelerator, please wait at the designated spot, informs Misaka.”

And the unavoidable experiment began at 8:30 PM.

Part 4

Kamijou left the black cat with Mikoto and then ran through the nighttime city.

On the west end of Academy City was a large industrial area.

Apparently, a train switchyard there was the location for the 10032nd experiment.

“...”

He recognized the number 10032. That was the serial number Misaka Imouto had mentioned in the back alley.

A great impatience assaulted Kamijou’s chest.

He had to get to that switchyard as quickly as possible, but the busses and trains had already been returned to their garages.

With most of the transportation facilities shut down, Kamijou had no choice but to run on his own two feet.

He knew he did not have much stamina left, but he was in too much of a hurry to keep a slower pace to preserve that stamina. Instead, he gritted his teeth and ran full speed through a shopping district.

He moved his battered body and ran despite the fact that doing so was shaving away the little stamina he had left.

Leaving the shopping district, he entered a residential area and the lights and hustle and bustle of the city seemed to grow more distant. As he ran further, the student dorms started growing sparse, too. After cutting past some small trees that had been artificially planted, he reached the industrial area.

Academy City had an industrial area so that items made from the research carried out in the city could also be produced within the city. However, the area was not filled with factories that looked like slightly dirty rented storage areas in a downtown area. Instead, the area was lined with windowless industrial buildings. The area was oddly organized and had no sense of being lived in. It was a little reminiscent of an area of a city filled with offices.

There was no one there.

The factories were surely structured to run 24 hours a day, but no sound could be heard because of their perfect sound proofing. The scenery looked like a dead city to Kamijou and he felt a chill in that midsummer night.

♦

As she remained alone on the iron bridge, Mikoto held the frightened black cat in her arms.

She recalled that the electromagnetic waves subconsciously emitted by her body made cats dislike her, but she didn't particularly care at that moment.

"...Is he an idiot?" she muttered in the darkness.

She had wanted to stop Kamijou. She had at least wanted to head with him to the area for the experiment.

But Kamijou had forbidden it.

What was important was that the Level 0 Imagine Breaker singlehandedly defeated the Level 5 Accelerator. If Mikoto, another Level 5, were helping Kamijou, it would be determined that Accelerator was defeated by a group of people that included a Level 5.

"If you want to save Misaka Imouto, leave this to me," the boy had said.

"I *will* return with her," the boy had promised.

Mikoto looked at the end of the bridge where the boy had disappeared.

Logically, she knew that she could not do anything by heading there. In fact, there was a chance she would destroy the solution that the boy had finally obtained. Because of that, staying there was the proper choice. She knew that. Anyone could figure that out logically.

But...

Something beyond logic did not want to understand it.

Mikoto gritted her teeth.

"...Do you really think I can do that!?"

In the end, Mikoto chased after Kamijou while still holding the black cat.

She simply could not sit idly by.

Part 5

At 8:30 PM, the switchyard became a battlefield.

Bluish-white flashes of light as if from a camera flash lit up the dark switchyard.

Misaka Imouto and Accelerator's feet kicked up the gravel.

The distance between them was less than ten meters.

"Hah. What!? Are you just walking around casually without a plan? If you like pain that much, I'll make you cry so much you might as well take a cough drop now!"

With his arms still spread out, Accelerator bent over and closed in on Misaka Imouto like he was a carnivorous beast.

He did not need to think about defense. In fact, he did not even need to think about attacking. For someone who could reflect all kinds of attacks and therefore could kill his opponent just by touching them, a fight was nothing more than thinking of the fastest and most definite way of touching his opponent.

As he could reflect all kinds of attacks, there was no way of stopping his legs from bringing him closer. Misaka Imouto was faced with that unreasonable amount of violence that was like driving a tank into the middle of a group of demonstrators.

"Ah!?" was Accelerator's dissatisfied cry.

Misaka Imouto took steps back to put some distance between her and Accelerator as if she were fleeing from his advance. Misaka Imouto paid close attention to the situation around her and continued to flee back sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left. The carnivorous beast that was Accelerator chased after her with a look of pure boredom in his eyes.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! That’s pathetic! What the hell are you hoping for?! No matter how much time you buy yourself, there isn’t gonna be a miracle!”

Misaka Imouto was not listening. She did nothing but put distance between her and her enemy while keeping that enemy in her range of vision. Accelerator felt like the blood vessels in his head were going to burst, but then he noticed that the girl was electrifying the surrounding air.

“Oh, come the hell on! Surely you know that’s fucking useless! And I’m not going to play along with your pathetic attempts at resisting much longer!”

Accelerator laughed mockingly. He could reflect any attack that was thrown at him and Misaka Imouto was purposefully not firing the electricity at him out of fear of that. The sparks were flying around him, but no actual attack came his way.

“What’s with her?”

Accelerator gritted his teeth, but then he noticed that he was short of breath. At first he thought he had used up too much oxygen by talking while running around, but it was too odd for that. A sharp stench sent off alarm bells in his head.

“Tonight is a windless night.” Misaka Imouto’s voice reverberated throughout the still air of the switchyard. “As such, Misaka may have a chance of winning, calls out Misaka.”

Accelerator checked on his surroundings again. Misaka Imouto continued to run away, she was firing electrical attacks around him, he was oddly out of breath, and he could reflect any direct attack.

(Ohhh, I see. Ozone, huh?)

The oxygen in the air could be broken apart with electricity. Oxygen molecules were normally formed from two oxygen atoms, but once the two oxygen atoms broke apart, they had a disposition toward connecting together in threes as ozone.

Oxygen and ozone were two different things. Breathing it in would not satisfy one’s lungs.

And as was obvious from its use in sterilization, it was toxic.

No attack would reach Accelerator, but that did not change the fact that he was a human that breathed in oxygen and breathed out carbon dioxide. If all the oxygen were removed from his surroundings, he would suffer from oxygen deprivation.

Misaka Imouto did not need to approach Accelerator. In fact, it was imperative that she kept her distance from him so that his attacks could not hit her while she continued to rob him of his oxygen.

“Good, good, excellent!! I take it back, you are a worthy enemy after all! Ha ha!! Now this is an excellent change of pace! After killing ten thousand of you, you’ve finally come up with a good idea!”

Accelerator chased after her while laughing out of enjoyment. Despite the fact that he was being cornered, he was still enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart.

“But!! There’s one weak point!”

Misaka Imouto’s shoulder’s shook out of surprise.

“Your plan fails if I catch up to you!!”

Accelerator’s foot suddenly caused the gravel behind him to explode. He had altered the vector for the motion of his foot. As if a rocket were firing from the bottom of his foot, he shot seven meters forward like a bullet in one step. Misaka Imouto tried to jump further back, but Accelerator heartlessly flew forward many times faster than she could move.

“If you don’t try to avoid this with everything you have, you really will die!”

As he yelled he struck with his left hand. The strike was gentle like he was stroking her cheek....and yet a cracking noise came from Misaka Imouto’s neck upon receiving the attack. Her vision spun around as her entire body spun like a bamboo copter before landing on the gravel.

His attack did all that, but he had actually been holding back.

If Accelerator had seriously been trying to kill her, her body would have exploded the instant he touched her skin.

“Now for a question. How many times have you been killed!?”

As Accelerator gave a broken-looking smile, he looked like a darkness hanging over her.

The smile splitting across his face filled her vision.

Something like a jeer came from his mouth that was opened so wide that drool was about to spill out.

Accelerator had regained his utter advantage. Misaka Imouto was balled up on the ground, but the tip of his shoe weaved through the gaps in her defenses and stabbed into her. His fist flew and struck her on the back. With each strike, he was holding back enough that her body would not be destroyed.

She was thrust into a spiral of intense pain as if she had been thrown into drum that was being repeatedly hit with a metal bat from the outside.

“Ghfh...!?”

Misaka Imouto was having trouble even remaining balled up and she finally lost to the force of a kick to the gut. She collapsed face up on the ground. Her forehead must have been cut because she could not see out of one eye due to flowing blood. She could see Accelerator breathing erratically in her blurry vision. He wiped away the drool that was flowing down from the smile splitting across his face.

Even after all that, Misaka Imouto did not resent Accelerator. It was not that she wanted to but could not. She merely saw no value in her own life. Once the experiment in which her 180,000 yen life was being used was over, her body would be retrieved and disposed of like a frog that had been dissected.

That was all there was to it.

That was all there was supposed to be to it.

And yet Accelerator suddenly stopped moving as if he had realized something. He slowly turned his head and looked at something over his shoulder.

(What...?)

From Misaka Imouto’s position face up on the ground, Accelerator’s body acted as a wall, blocking her view of whatever he was looking at. But Accelerator froze up. The entire experiment existed in order to elevate him from “strongest” to “invincible”, but he seemed to have forgotten all about that.

“...Hey. What happens to the experiment if this happens?” Accelerator muttered while still frozen in place.

Misaka Imouto felt that was an odd thing to ask the person he had been in the process of killing, but as time passed, Accelerator still did not move from that spot.

Misaka Imouto crawled along the gravel so she could see what Accelerator was looking at.

Someone was standing in a gap between the piles of containers circling the switchyard.

Standing there was a normal person who had nothing to do with the experiment.

Standing there was Kamijou Touma.

Accelerator did not know what the procedure was when a normal person entered the experiment. He looked like he didn't know what to do about the high school boy who had suddenly appeared.

"...Get away from her," said Kamijou as if stabbing at Accelerator.

His entire body was wrapped in such anger that it looked like static electricity would scatter about if someone touched him.

"Get the hell away from Misaka Imouto. Can you not hear me?"

Accelerator frowned at Kamijou's words. He then turned back toward Misaka Imouto. He turned his somewhat critical red gaze on her.

"Hey, Misaka's the name of your original, right? If he knows that, then he must know you. C'mon now, don't bring unrelated people to the experimental grounds."

Accelerator's expression made it clear that Kamijou had ruined his fun.

"...I mean fucking come *on*. What am I supposed to do now? I guess the standard thing would be to silence the person who knows about this secret experiment, but that just leaves a bad taste in my mouth. He's not some disposable doll. He's just a normal-..."

"Shut the hell up and get away from her, you lowly thug!!"

Kamijou's lightning-like rage cut off Accelerator's words.

Accelerator looked over at him as if he were looking at something he truly could not believe.

It was like he was a child who had never once been yelled at before.

"Who are you? Do you know who you're talking to here? Not only am I one of the seven Level 5s, but I'm the one who stands at the top of them all. And you call me a lowly thug? What the fuck? Do you think you're a god or something? Don't make me laugh."

His low, quiet voice was accompanied by killer intent leaking into the air around him like static electricity.

That massive killer intent felt like billions of eyeballs staring at Kamijou from the darkness of the night.

"..."

Even so, the boy continued to glare at Accelerator.

His incandescent gaze silently said that he did not care in the slightest if his opponent was the strongest or the best or the greatest or whatever.

"...Heh. Now this is interesting."

Accelerator's red eyes froze over.

Strongest and invincible were different. When someone was invincible the victor was clear before the battle began, but when someone was the strongest, their strength was only discovered once the fight began.

In other words, the fact that Accelerator was the strongest meant he was only at a level where people would still try to pick a fight with him.

"...You truly are interesting."

Accelerator's gaze had moved from Misaka Imouto to Kamijou. He was setting the experiment aside and giving a hundred times more priority to crushing Kamijou's gaze.

A crazed crimson heat resided within the white boy's eyes.

His smile was thin and wide. It split across his face like a piece of melted cheese stretched out to the left and right.

"..."

Even so, Kamijou did not take a single step back.

Instead, he took a step forward.

"What are you-...?"

Misaka Imouto was in complete shock.

That boy was going to fight Accelerator. He had no weapon and he was going to fight that person who could singlehandedly crush an entire army smiling the entire time.

That boy had spoken to Accelerator.

He had told Accelerator to get away from her.

In other words, the reason that boy was on that battlefield was...

The reason that boy was risking his life in that fight was...

"...What are you doing, asks Misaka?" Misaka Imouto said in a trembling voice.

–I-I see, so you're the little sister. But you really do look alike. Both your height and weight look the same.

It did not matter how many times Misaka Imouto died in that experiment because her life had no value.

–Hey. Thanks for carrying those drinks and taking care of those fleas yesterday.

But he had nothing to do with the experiment and he could not be mass produced.

–That's right! A name! This is your cat, so take responsibility and give it a name!

An original who there was only one of in the world was going to get hurt due to the experiment.

(What is this...?)

Misaka Imouto felt some sort of pain within herself.

No matter how much she thought, she could not determine the source of the pain.

(Misaka has questions about her own mental state.)

Even so, Kamijou did not respond. He took one more step toward the battlefield.

Misaka Imouto switched out her thinking and spoke in order to stop him.

"What are you doing? asks Misaka for a second time. Misaka is an imitation that can be remade as many times as needed while you are irreplaceable, so what are you doing? asks Misaka for a third time."

There was no inconsistency in her logic. There was no disturbance in her tone of voice. Her words had been extremely exact as if she were running according to a program, so she concluded that her mental state was all green.

Yet her heart was beating at a terribly fast pace. Her breathing was unbelievably shallow and she could not suck in the proper amount of oxygen.

Misaka Imouto wanted to stop that boy from entering the experimental grounds.

Misaka Imouto wanted to stop that boy from clashing with Accelerator.

However, her useless battered body would not move as she wanted it to. That was why she continued to try to stop the boy with her words as she lay atop the gravel.

She did not realize that those very words were doing nothing more than drawing the boy to the battlefield faster.

“Misaka can be automatically produced at the press of a button as long as the proper machinery and chemicals are prepared, explains Misaka. Misaka has an artificially made body and a borrowed mind. Her value is 180,000 yen and there are 9968 more in reserve, so stopping the experiment just for her is...”

“...Shut up,” the boy muttered cutting off Misaka Imouto.

“What?” she replied.

“I said shut up. None of that matters. You have an artificially constructed body? You have a borrowed mind? You can be automatically produced at the press of a button as long as the proper machinery and chemicals are prepared? Your value is 180,000 yen? Well, I don’t care about that! None of that matters!” the boy yelled into the night sky as the conflagration of his rage burned.

And yet his voice was distressed like he was being hit by cold rain.

“I’m standing here to save *you*! I’m not here for anyone else. I’m fighting to save *you*! So the fact that you have an artificially constructed body, have a borrowed mind, can be automatically produced at the press of a button, have a 180,000 yen value, or any other insignificant shit *does not matter*!”

Misaka Imouto did not understand.

She did not understand what the boy was trying to say. There had not been a single lie in what she had said. She was a being that could be automatically produced at the press of a button. If one was lost, one could be made to replace it. If twenty thousand were lost, twenty thousand could be made to replace them. That was all she was.

“There is only one of you in the world! Why can’t you figure out something that simple!?”

But for some reason the boy’s yell reached her.

It was not that she believed what he was saying.

Misaka Imouto still felt that there was no problem no matter how many of her lives were lost.

However, there was still one person who was yelling that he did not want to lose that tiny existence.

That boy certainly had no power.

There was no way he possessed anything making him worthy of being referred to as Academy City’s strongest.

“Don’t go off and die. I still have plenty more to tell you.”

Even so, Misaka Imouto felt that boy was strong.

“I’m going to save you now, so just stay quiet and watch.”

She felt that way of living made him stronger than anyone else.

Part 6

Accelerator may have been the strongest, but he was not invincible.

Kamijou’s Imagine Breaker could destroy any kind of supernatural power even if it was one of god’s miracles. Even if Accelerator’s reflection was a perfect defense that could reject even a nuclear explosion, Kamijou knew it should not be able to defend against his right hand.

Accelerator was the strongest and therefore he could stand up to the entire world at once.

However, his power was not absolute enough to be able to defend against Imagine Breaker.

A chance for victory lay in that slight error.

“...”

Kamijou looked around the area.

For about a hundred meters around him, the ground was covered in nothing but gravel and steel rails. Kamijou Touma and Accelerator were both standing on that level surface with nowhere to hide. They were about ten meters apart. That distance could be filled in three or four steps if one of them started running.

Kamijou stopped breathing.

He slightly lowered his entire body like a spring and...

“Ooohhhhhhh!”

He explosively started running toward Accelerator.

However, Accelerator did not move from that spot. In fact, he did not even clench either fist. He kept his arms dangling at his sides, he did not use his legs to shift his centre of gravity, and a smile split across his face.

Accelerator slightly tapped the heel of his foot on the gravel as if he were tapping his foot to a rhythm.

In that instant, the gravel below his feet exploded like he had stepped on a landmine.

A large amount of gravel scattered in every direction and at close range it was reminiscent of a shotgun blast.

"...!"

By the time Kamijou realized what was going on, it was too late.

He immediately brought his arms up to cover his face and over a dozen small stones of various sizes struck Kamijou's body. Just when he thought his feet had been knocked from the ground due to the large shock, his entire body was forcefully blown back. He rolled along the ground before finally coming to a stop a few meters back.

"...Too slow," said an unpleasant voice that sounded like pieces of rusted metal being scraped together.

The intense pain had disoriented Kamijou and he merely looked blankly in the direction of the voice completely forgetting to stand back up.

"That's nowhere near enough. That speed of yours is just a hundred years too slooooooowwwww!"

Accelerator stepped on the ground again.

He must have converted the vector of that shock in some way because a steel rail lying at his feet stood up on end like there had been a spring under it. Accelerator used a backhanded blow like he was brushing a spider web away and knocked the rail flying.

His action had been nothing more than the slight strike one would use on an unreasonable child, but a great noise like a church bell resounded throughout the switchyard. The steel rail bent into a shallow V-shape and flew straight for Kamijou like a bullet.

"!!"

Kamijou frantically rolled and jumped away from its path.

Immediately afterwards, the crushed piece of steel pierced into the ground like a holy sword in the exact spot Kamijou had been lying in before.

Kamijou thought he had just barely managed to avoid it, but the mass of steel weighed hundreds of kilograms. When it struck the ground, it sent a large amount of gravel flying into the air. It was like a meteorite striking the sea.

Countless small stones stabbed into his body.

The shock this gave to his chest forced all of the oxygen from his lungs.

“Gh...Ah...!”

Accelerator fired a second and third steel rail at Kamijou who was rolling on the ground.

Those masses of steel flying through the air were as unavoidable for a human as handgun bullets.

A direct hit from one would be certain death and even barely avoiding one would lead to damage from the gravel scattered by the hit, which would slowly but surely add up and lead to death.

All Kamijou could do was continue to roll along the ground. Beyond that, all he could do was try to read the direction the gravel would be sent and jump in the same direction to reduce the damage as much as possible.

He could not approach.

He avoided ten or twenty of those steel bullets and was struck by the scattered gravel each time, but he was gradually heading away from the center of the switchyard and to the outer part.

Even then, Kamijou felt the battle was in a stalemate.

It was true he was the only one receiving any attacks, but he believed that Accelerator would not deliver a decisive blow.

But the sound of the air being sliced cut off his thoughts.

“...?”

Kamijou thought a rail was headed his way, so he immediately jumped backwards. He had done so to reduce the shock from the scattered gravel even just a little bit, but the steel bullet did not come.

Kamijou suspiciously frowned while keeping on his guard.

The steel rail flew past over Kamijou’s head and stabbed into the ground behind him.

“!?”

Kamijou had jumped backwards to reduce the damage he took.

The gravel sprayed at him at close range from the opposite direction than he had expected. It was like running into a truck that was moving at 100 kph while moving at 100 kph yourself. His own actions had doubled the damage that stabbed into his back. His breathing stopped as if he had been struck with a bat in the back and he pathetically collapsed onto the ground.

The sound of objects slicing through the night sky continued.

Kamijou looked up and saw multiple steel rails flying toward him.

(Wha-...?)

Kamijou immediately tried to roll out of the way, but the rails landed on all sides of him simultaneously. As if he were being beaten by five or six people, gravel assaulted him from all sides.

He could not defend against or evade that. Having lost all options, Kamijou could only sit there dumbfounded as over a hundred small rocks stabbed at him. His body was knocked about making him look like a shrimp that had been brought onto land.

“Gh...gheah...! Ahh...aahhh...!”

Even so, Kamijou managed to grab one of the steel rails sticking into the ground nearby in order to stand up. His legs were still shaking from the damage leftover from Mikoto’s lightning attacks and his mouth was filled with the taste of blood.

He was just barely managing to hold on to his consciousness when he saw it.

In the distance ahead of him, he saw Accelerator slightly lowering his entire body like a spring.

“Ah hah! See!? You’re slow, so slow, so very slow! Can you become a fox and bring some enjoyment to your hunter or are you nothing but a pig to be eaten, you lowly thug!?”

At that time, there were about thirty meters between Accelerator and Kamijou.

Despite this, Accelerator brought that distance to zero in only two steps.

The gravel at his feet exploded as if from a rocket and Accelerator charged toward Kamijou with tremendous speed as he moved almost like a rock skipping on the water.

Tension sank into Kamijou’s stomach.

He immediately tried to stick out his fist, but Accelerator’s foot struck the ground first.

The steel rail lying at his feet stood up as if a spring lay beneath it. The bolt in the railroad tie popped off like a shirt button.

Before Kamijou could respond in surprise, the rising rail struck him in the chin like an uppercut.

“Ghah...!”

His body shot up and a space of twenty centimeters opened up between his feet and the ground. Accelerator watched that with a satisfied look and opened up his right hand like it was a demon’s claw and aimed it for Kamijou’s airborne body.

That was the very same hand that had sent steel rails flying like bullets with just a soft stroke.

“...!!”

Kamijou saw Accelerator’s right hand moving in toward him like a poisonous snake and immediately struck out with his right hand despite still being in midair. In a small piece of fortune, Kamijou’s right hand somehow managed to brush away Accelerator’s hand.

That was all he did, but Accelerator looked up at Kamijou as if he had seen something truly unbelievable.

As if trying to shake something off, Accelerator forcefully stomped on the ground.

That stomp turned the gravel into a dangerous weapon and it struck Kamijou all over as he floated in midair. He stopped breathing and fell to the ground like a corpse. After rolling for a few meters with his arms and legs sprawled out, he stopped because his back had struck something.

“...?”

It was the side of a container.

It was part of the piles of containers that surrounded the switchyard. Accelerator and Misaka Imouto had been in the center of the switchyard, so Kamijou must have travelled a few dozen meters while evading the various attacks.

The containers were piled up five or six tall and the piles were about as tall as a three story building.

For an instant, Kamijou glanced at the wall of the container his back was to, but...

“Oh, so you have time to look away!? If you want to die that badly, I’ll turn you into such a lovely piece of art that you’ll end up with a Guinness World Record!!”

There was a crazed laugh.

Kamijou frantically turned back around just in time to see Accelerator sink down and then jump up from the gravel a few meters away. It should have just been a normal vertical jump, but his slender body shot four meters up into the air.

He aimed his feet for Kamijou's head.

Kamijou immediately rolled to the side to avoid the strike and Accelerator's jump kick struck the metal side of the container Kamijou had been leaning on.

A great noise like a church bell resounded throughout the area.

Suddenly, the pile of containers collapsed.

It was like when a pile of building blocks had the bottommost block pulled out.

The instant Accelerator's jump kick crushed the bottommost container like it was made of paper, the containers it had been supporting wobbled and suddenly collapsed. When one collapsed, it brought the one next to it down with it causing the entire pile of containers to collapse like a house of cards.

Kamijou gulped down air and looked above.

A number of containers had been thrown into the air like giant dice and were about to rain down on him.

"!"

He immediately jumped up to his feet. Just when he was about to jump to the side in an attempt to avoid the containers falling toward his head, he saw something in the edge of his vision.

He saw Accelerator lowering down like his entire body was a spring.

He then shot forward like a bullet in order to pursue Kamijou who was trying to flee the containers.

Accelerator could reflect any kind of impact, so he did not need to worry about avoiding the rain of containers even though each of them weighed more than a ton.

But that was not so for Kamijou.

If he tried to avoid the containers, he could not avoid Accelerator's pursuit.

If he tried to counterattack Accelerator with his right hand, he would be crushed by the containers.

"...!"

Kamijou immediately kicked up the gravel at his feet toward Accelerator's approaching eyes.

Of course, that would not stop Accelerator.

"Hah hah! Did you really think that would work? If you're gonna try that, at least make sure you go all the way...like this!!"

Accelerator manipulated the vectors of the gravel that struck his body so that it was reflected back at Kamijou at double the speed.

Kamijou immediately crossed his arms to protect his face and chest.

In the next instant, that shotgun blast of small stones struck Kamijou's body. His body flew back a few meters as if he had been shot by a shell.

In doing so, he evaded the rain of containers.

In doing so, he managed to get some space between himself and Accelerator.

"Ah?"

Accelerator gave that sound of slight admiration and the containers struck the ground an instant later. A large amount of gravel flew up into the air and a cloud of sand obstructed Kamijou's vision. Suddenly, countless containers came rolling through that cloud of dust as if to crush Kamijou. The containers rampaged around on unpredictable paths like living beings similar to dice dancing around in a giant cup.

(Shit...!)

Kamijou desperately jumped out of the way of the containers.

They finally stopped moving, but the cloud of dust continued to rob Kamijou of his vision. No, it was not a cloud of dust. It seemed the containers had held flour. The cloud of powder was like a white mist as it hazily obstructed Kamijou's view.

That white curtain surrounded Kamijou in all directions.

He did not know when or from where Accelerator would slice through that curtain and attack him. Kamijou felt a hopeless tension like he had been thrown blindfolded into a cage with a carnivorous beast.

But instead, he heard a voice coming from in front of him beyond the white curtain.

It was as if Accelerator were showing off his location.

“Heh. It looks like these containers held flour, but this nice windless night might be making this a very dangerous situation.”

Kamijou looked questioningly in the direction of the voice.

“There are stories of explosions in mines, right? Those don’t happen because someone didn’t use their explosives properly.” The voice sounded like it was grinning and enjoying itself. “They were caused by the fine dust from the stones filling the air in the mine. *A lot like now*.”

Kamijou jumped out of shock.

He figured out what Accelerator was trying to do, so he moved his battered body in an attempt to get out of there.

“If there is powder floating in the air, it can be ignited. The combustion rate of oxygen is ridiculously fast, so it seems all the air in the place becomes one giant bomb.”

Kamijou was no longer listening.

He was merely running as fast as he could without looking aside.

He had turned his back on Accelerator and was trying to escape that giant space filled with that powder.

He ran and ran and continued to run.

Accelerator’s voice then pierced into Kamijou’s back.

“Surely you’ve at least heard of a dust explosion.”

Immediately afterwards, all sound was blown away.

The area with a thirty meter radius in which the flour had been scattered became a giant bomb. The entire area became wrapped in flames and heat as if gasoline vaporized into the air had been ignited.

Kamijou had just barely managed to escape the curtain of flour when it happened.

The shock wave struck his back and knocked him down to the gravel, but he managed to avoid being enveloped in the flames themselves.

However, a dust explosion was different from a normal explosion because it used the oxygen in the air as fuel. The explosion instantly stole all the oxygen in the area which lowered the air pressure dramatically.

Fortunately, it had occurred outside rather than in a sealed area, so a vacuum was not created. But the sudden change in air pressure internally squeezed on his organs to the very limit. If it had actually been a vacuum, his body would likely have burst open from the inside.

“Gah...Ahh...!”

Kamijou moved his battered body and just barely managed to stand up as the sea of flames lit the switchyard up as if it were the middle of the day. He turned around toward the pile of containers he had fled from.

Accelerator was walking there.

He was calmly walking through the crimson purgatory he himself had created.

“God damn it. I’m sure you just experienced it yourself, but the lack of oxygen was tough on me, too. Fuck, I thought I was gonna die. You should be glad. I think you’re the first in the world to make me, Accelerator, think he was gonna die.”

His voice was light, like he was just having a casual conversation.

“Heh heh. I guess I can’t use my tagline about being fine even in a nuclear explosion anymore, can I? Well, I can just bring an oxygen tank with me. They make ones about the size of a can of hairspray, right? Do you know how much one of those costs?”

Accelerator’s cheerfulness while within that hell of flames scared Kamijou.

“...!”

Kamijou immediately tried to put himself on guard, but the damage had permeated his legs making them tremble uncontrollably.

“...Well? What are you even trying to do?”

Amid the flames, Accelerator tilted his head to the side like a child.

“All your frantic efforts haven’t gotten you a single step closer to me. And what the hell do you even think you can do if you were somehow able to get near me?” Accelerator refreshingly spread his arms open amid the hellfire. “I can manipulate every vector that touches my body. That includes the flow of your blood, y’know? In other words, the instant you touch me, every blood vessel and organ in your body will explode. Do you really understand that?”

“...”

Kamijou’s trembling legs froze up.

Even though Kamijou's right hand could penetrate Accelerator's reflection, *what could he really do*?

He could only touch Accelerator with his right hand. That meant he was basically boxing with one hand sealed off. And even if he could strike Accelerator's face with his right hand, if Accelerator managed to grab his arm before he could pull it back...

Accelerator laughed in a friendly manner as Kamijou stood frozen in place.

"Well, don't worry about it too much. You put up a nice effort. It's actually a miracle that you're even breathing after facing me. It'd be rather selfish to want more than that, don't you think?"

He laughed in a friendly manner despite being in the middle of a deadly fight.

"Fuck. You are lucky that your potential was so low. You're so weak that I couldn't use my reflection on you properly. You really did find a weak point in me. Judgment acts so thoughtlessly with their powers and Anti-Skill brings out all their high-tech weapons, so it's all over after I reflect the first shot."

Accelerator clapped his hands in applause within the sea of flames.

He truly sounded like he was thanking his opponent from the bottom of his heart.

"You made a good effort. You made a really good effort. ...So it's about time you had a rest!"

Accelerator's body sank down slightly amid the flames.

With a roar, the white boy shot like a bullet toward Kamijou blowing away even the flames as he went. There were a few dozen meters between them, but he brought that to zero in two or three steps. Accelerator made his way right up to Kamijou with motions like a rock skipping on the water.

"...!"

Tension crawled up from Kamijou's stomach to the top of his throat.

The right hand of suffering and the left hand of poison.

Those hands could convert any vector that they touched and were therefore hands of darkness that could bring death to any living thing. Just by touching the skin, they could cause a human heart to burst from the inside by reversing the flow of the blood via the capillaries and reversing the flow of the bodily electricity via the surface of the skin.

Accelerator brought both hands together.

His hands were pressed together at the wrist like he was wearing handcuffs and he thrust them toward Kamijou's face.

Kamijou immediately tried to move back, but his trembling legs would not move properly.

Those hands that could crush one's soul approached before Kamijou's eyes.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuccccccccckkkkkkkkkkkkkk!"

Kamijou reflexively shut his eyes and swung his right hand up prepared for the worst. As he had cut off his own vision, he had no idea where he was aiming his fist.

With a dull sensation, his right hand punched Accelerator in the face.

"Eh?"

The first one to express his surprise at that result was Kamijou, not Accelerator. He had truly not expected to hit and he had not expected his battered fist to actually do any damage even if it did hit.

However, Accelerator was knocked away and was now squirming around atop the gravel.

"Ah? Ow... Ha ha... What the fuck? Oh, wow. Ha ha ha. Dammit. Excellent, excellent. That was great! That was wonderful! Now you've done it!"

The white boy laughed insanely as he crouched on the ground like a demon about to grow wings.

But Kamijou was not listening.

When he thought about it, it had been odd from the beginning.

Why had he not realized it after fighting with Accelerator that long?

There was an overwhelming handicap between Kamijou and Accelerator. Accelerator could kill people just by touching them. On the other hand, Kamijou would die instantly if he touched Accelerator with any part of his body besides his right hand.

And on top of that, Kamijou could not move his legs properly due to the damage he had taken from Mikoto's lightning attacks.

He had such a great handicap, and yet...

(Could it be...?)

Accelerator charged toward Kamijou.

His right hand that could kill with a touch was aimed straight for Kamijou's face.

(Could it be that he's...?)

Kamijou avoided it just by swinging his head to the side.

He had no military training or anything, but he was easily able to evade it.

(Is he...?)

Kamijou clenched his right fist.

He moved in toward Accelerator to counter Accelerator's missed attack.

(Is he *actually*...really fucking weak?)

"Gbah!?"

Kamijou's fist plowed into Accelerator's face. He moved his hand back and forth in complex trajectories like someone swinging a knife around, but Accelerator never once grazed his skin. Kamijou slipped past Accelerator's poisonous snake-like arms and attacked Accelerator's face with his fist again and again.

"Dammit, what!? What's with those weird movements!? You're not an eel, so quit wriggling around like that and stay put!"

Accelerator tried to grab the fist that was stabbing in at his face, but the smooth serpentine movements of Kamijou's hand prevented him from doing so.

"Hah. You've never lost." Kamijou danced around with precise footing. "And *that* is why you're weak! You defeat all of your enemies in a single strike and you can easily reflect any attack. There's no way you would actually know how to fight!"

That summarized the gap between them.

Accelerator's fights had no chance of loss on his part. They were just one-sided slaughters. Because his ability was simply too powerful, he had never needed to learn how to fight.

Accelerator's stance was sloppy. He did not clench his fist. His fingers were spread out like he was just asking to have them jammed and he gave no thought to his footing or his center of gravity.

However, Accelerator's ability was so powerful that he did not need to worry about that kind of thing.

If you could kill any enemy in a single strike, there was no reason to train in techniques to defeat your enemy well.

If you could reflect any attack, there was no reason to put any effort into predicting and evading or defending against your opponent's attacks.

Simply put, techniques and effort were things that weak people used to supplement their power.

But that strength was not Accelerator's strength. It was the strength of his esper ability.

So what if there was a right hand that could seal off that ability?

Accelerator was not someone who there was absolutely no way of defeating. He was not invincible.

He was merely exceedingly difficult to defeat. He was merely the strongest.

A chance for Kamijou's victory lay in that slight gap between invincible and strongest.

"Tch. Shut the fuck up, you lowly thug!!!"

Accelerator's foot lightly tapped the ground.

Like there was a spring beneath it, a steel rail lying at Accelerator's feet stood up.

If he knocked it away, the mass of steel would fly straight into Kamijou's body.

But Kamijou did not let him.

In order to stop that attack that he had predicted was coming, Kamijou's right fist slammed into Accelerator's face. Accelerator was forcefully knocked to the ground and he manipulated the vectors of the gravel knocked up by his own body to send a blast of small stones at Kamijou's upper body.

But it did not hit.

Kamijou had predicted that attack too, and he had managed to avoid it by crouching down like he was about to start crawling along the ground.

Kamijou was not especially good at fighting.

In a fight against delinquents, he could win with one on one, he was in danger with one on two, and he would unhesitatingly run away with one on three. That was the extent of his skill.

But even so, Accelerator could not reach him.

The punches Kamijou was throwing did not have his weight behind them. They were diversionary punches that put more strength into pulling back than in the punch itself. In boxing, they would be called jabs.

But even so, Accelerator was being hit strongly.

Accelerator had never once lost which also meant that he had never once been in a proper fight. Because his power was the strongest, he had never had a chance to use his athletic abilities normally. Kamijou could not utterly crush even a delinquent in a fight, but he could easily beat the hell out of a sheltered boy who had never been in a fight.

"...! Kh. Hah! Interesting. What is with that right hand!?" Accelerator yelled recklessly with his arms stretched out after having received that fist to his face again and again.

One of them was the strongest who had never lost once in his life.

The other was the weakest who would never give up no matter how many times he lost.

Who was the stronger one? The answer was Kamijou. If he lost a hundred times, he would stand back up a hundred times. If he lost a thousand times, he would crawl back to his feet a thousand times. And each of those losses was converted into strength that was now poured into his right fist that slammed into Accelerator's face.

Accelerator had always been able to reflect any kind of attack, so even though he now thought of the attack before his eyes as dangerous, that thought did not lead to any actions to avoid it. Despite the fist striking him, he recklessly swung his arms about in an attempt to chase after Kamijou who was keeping away. He looked just like a child being teased by an adult.

Accelerator knew that better than anyone and he could not stand it.

The pride of Academy City's strongest shook the gap between it and reality and a creaking sound could be heard.

An unknown pain that felt like it was crushing his nose further affected Accelerator's concentration.

"Fuck. Fuck! Fuuuuuuccccckkkk!!"

As Accelerator roared, the ground at his feet exploded. His body flew toward Kamijou like a bullet. He had manipulated the shock of his heel hitting the ground. He had used the scattered kinetic energy to double or triple his movement speed.

But...

“What the hell!? Why the hell can’t I hit you!?”

Even with that carnivorous beast-like speed, he could not reach Kamijou.

Even if he was faster, his attacks were still easily avoided as long as they could be predicted. It was the same as how a sharp knife was a deadly weapon, but it posed no threat if it was being held by a kindergartener.

The fight was more or less over. The damage from Kamijou’s light hits had piled up and Academy City’s strongest esper legs gave out.

In the instant that strength left Accelerator’s knees, Kamijou struck his face with a serious punch.

It was a strike like someone using a golf club to hit a golf ball with everything they had. For that killer strike, he rotated his hips to put his weight into it and knocked Accelerator’s body to the ground where it rolled a bit.

“Pant...pant...!?”

Accelerator lifted his upper body and looked forward. When he saw Kamijou Touma slowly approaching, he starting using his hands to drag himself backwards.

He hurt.

Accelerator automatically reflected all attacks, so that was an unknown sensation for him. To him, his senses on his skin were just sensors to send pleasure from his skin to his brain. His undeveloped pain sensitivity had almost no resistance to pain, so the intense signals felt like they were burning him.

“...The Sisters were living with everything they had.” Kamijou tightly clenched his right hand. “They gathered all their strength and lived. They worked with everything they had.” Kamijou gritted his teeth. “Why do people like that need to act as your prey!?”

“Ee!” Accelerator froze in place.

But Kamijou did not stop.

“No!” Accelerator shook his head.

He did not know what it was to lose. He had never once lost in his life, so he did not have the slightest bit of resistance to losing. He had never even had to think of the possibility of losing before.

But even so, Kamijou did not stop.

The night wind blew on Kamijou's bangs making them wave like a nameless flower blooming in a graveyard.

(...Wind?)

Accelerator finally realized something as he was being cornered by Kamijou who looked like some kind of evil spirit.

The wind.

"Ku."

Accelerator laughed. Kamijou stopped moving. Accelerator guessed Kamijou had sensed some kind of danger, but he did not care. It was too late even if he had realized it.

"Kuka."

Accelerator's power allowed him to change the vectors of anything he touched. Motion, heat, electricity. Whatever kind of power it was, he could freely control it as long as it had a vector.

"Kukaki."

That meant that, *if he could grasp the vector of the wind flowing through the atmosphere, he could bring the motion of the giant wind flowing throughout the entire world into his hands*!

"Kukakikekokakakikukekikikokakakikukokokukekekekokikukakukekekokakukekikakokekikikukukukikikakikukokukukekukakikukokekukekukikukikokikakaka!!"

Accelerator lifted his hands above his head like he was trying to grab the invisible moon.

With a roar, the flow of the wind started to swirl around.

The look on the other boy's face changed, but it was too late. A large atmospheric swirl that looked like a hole had opened in the earth had taken a spherical form above Accelerator's head. Gravel in the area was swept up with it and that giant swirl of destruction with a radius of a few dozen meters gave its joyous birth cry.

Accelerator laughed and yelled "kill".

That sphere of destruction created from the world's atmosphere sliced through the air.

It became a spear of wind flying at 120 m/s. At that speed, wind could easily lift up a car. That spear of wind very easily blew away the boy like he had been struck by the hand of an invisible giant.

Part 7

The wind died, sound died, and the atmosphere died.

Accelerator looked out over the disaster he had created. The gravel covering the ground in the switchyard had been swept up in the wind leaving the earthen ground visible in places. The boy was blown away twenty meters where his back struck the pole to a broken wind turbine. He then slid down to the ground. Falling to the gravel would probably have been a better outcome for him, but either way his fate was the same. Hitting something at 120 m/s was not much different from getting into a car accident without hitting the brakes.

Kamijou lay unmoving on the ground below the turbine with his arms and legs sprawled out. It was unclear whether he was alive or not.

"...Hm."

Accelerator had only just thought up that method and it had caused more destruction than he had imagined.

But it was still incomplete. Unlike his automatic reflection, he had to think about the original vector and the altered vector when he was altering vectors under his own will.

Wind, the flow of the atmosphere, required complex calculations that involved chaos theory, so it could not be completely predicted without the use of Tree Diagram.

He doubted that the flow of the entire world's atmosphere could be calculated in a single human's head.

He had only managed to manipulate the wind within Academy City and that had still been imperfect.

However, it had still produced that much destruction. He no longer needed Level 6. If he could calculate the flow of the wind more perfectly and more accurately, he already held the power to destroy the world in his hands.

He held the world in his hands.

That feeling rushed all over Accelerator's body. The feeling of victory felt even more fresh within his chest because he had been driven to the edge of defeat just before.

He was sure once more that there was nothing in the world that could defeat him.

A nuclear bomb or that unknown right hand would do him no harm.

“Heh...!” Accelerator finally started to laugh. “What’s with you!? What’s with you!? What’s with you!!? After all that tough talk, that’s all you could do!? I’m gonna fire another one, so how about you show me the return of the badass loser!?”

As Accelerator yelled, he spread his hands above his head like he was trying to embrace the night sky.

“Compress the air. Compress, compress. Hahn, I see. Excellent. I just thought of something really fucking nice. C’mon, stand up, weakest. This won’t be worth it unless you play along!”

Kamijou did not respond.

Countless steel rails were stuck into the gravel like crosses and a deathly wind blew through that graveyard like area. Only the violent wind and the crazed laughter could be heard.

♦

The black cat gave a displeased mew at Mikoto’s feet.

In that instant, Misaka Mikoto set foot inside the switchyard.

She had been watching Kamijou’s fight from the beginning. She had wanted to charge between him and Accelerator countless times, but doing so would make his plan fail. Mikoto had only been able to silently watch as Kamijou became more and more battered.

But she had reached her limit.

If she let that boy fight on his own any longer, he would truly die.

“Stop this, Accelerator!”

Mikoto stuck out her arm at a distance of a few dozen meters. A coin lay on the thumb of her clenched fist. Purple electricity was overflowing from her entire body. With just a light flick of her thumb, Misaka Mikoto could fire the Railgun she was named for at three times the speed of sound.

But Accelerator did not even glance over at the Railgun.

He continued to increase the power of the raging wind as if telling her to go ahead and do it.

Any attack she fired would just bounce back and damage her.

Any powerful attack he received would just be sent right back at the one who fired it.

"..."

Mikoto's fingers trembled.

If the Railgun was sent back at her, her body would be smashed to pieces at three times the speed of sound.

If she and Accelerator were to fight, she would be slaughtered in 185 moves. That result given by a machine could not be changed and it stabbed into Mikoto's heart like a shard of ice.

Even so, Mikoto lifted her head.

It was not that she wanted to protect someone because she could defeat her enemy.

She had to fight that enemy she could not defeat because she had someone she wanted to protect.

"...-op, Misaka."

Suddenly Mikoto realized someone was calling her name.

The voice was so very weak, but it belonged to a boy she knew very well.

"...Stop, Misaka!"

Kamijou Touma's sorrowful cry caused Mikoto's hand to freeze.

In Kamijou's plan, he had to defeat Accelerator in order to fool the researchers. Once Mikoto interfered, that plan would fail.

If Mikoto did not interfere, the mass of raging wind would crush Kamijou's body.

If Mikoto did interfere, Kamijou would be allowing ten thousand Sisters to be killed.

"..."

Even so, Mikoto could not just sit and watch.

She did not feel that she was abandoning the Sisters to their deaths.

She had another plan. If she purposefully lost to Accelerator, it would fool the researchers and the experiment would be stopped.

Mikoto did not want to die.

But no matter how much they struggled, she had never had any other option.

"...I'm sorry."

That was why she apologized to Kamijou in the end.

Whatever she chose, Kamijou could no longer be saved. If he was crushed by that swirling wind, he would of course die, but if he either had to watch the Sisters die or Mikoto alone died to stop it, he would be unable to withstand that truth.

Kamijou Touma wanted for everyone to go home with a smile and without losing anyone or anything. That dream would be shattered that night in that switchyard.

"So I'm sorry," Mikoto apologized even if it was selfish. "But I know I want you to live."

"Stop!!" Kamijou yelled.

He was so battered that he could no longer even stand up, but he still desperately stretched out an arm that would never reach her in an attempt to stop Mikoto.

Mikoto gave a small smile.

The boy was not aware that his cries were what allowed Mikoto to fight without fear of death.

"....."

Mikoto stuck her right hand out toward that enemy she could not defeat who was known as Accelerator.

She only needed to create the magnetic rails and flick the coin to pass the point of no return. She would not be able to do any damage to Accelerator because he could reflect any attack, but she would still be able to put a stop to the death that was approaching before her eyes.

(Why did it end up like this? Why couldn't it have ended in some different way? Why couldn't it have ended in the most wonderful way where everyone heads home in the end with a smile and without losing anyone or anything?)

As Mikoto's thoughts floated up into the air, Accelerator sneered as he spread his arms wide up into the night sky. In the next instant, the wind flowing through the city focused on one point. It was a point a hundred meters above Accelerator's head. When the raging wind gathered there, a bright white light appeared as if from welding.

It was plasma.

Compressing the air created heat. Internal combustion engines used that fact. By compressing the city's air with a ridiculous compression ratio, it had turned into a mass of heat exceeding ten thousand degrees Celsius. This forcibly caused the atoms in the nearby air to split into cations and electrons which turned them to plasma.

That point of light swallowed up the surrounding air and instantaneously grew to have a radius of 20 meters.

The surrounding darkness was annihilated by the pure white light.

The heat of ten thousand degrees caused a burning pain on Mikoto's skin.

"...!"

A chill ran down Mikoto's back that seemed to freeze her spine.

That was not an attack that humanity could defend against. That mass of heat could dig up a nuclear shelter from the ground, so there was no way a flesh-and-blood body could do anything about it.

Misaka Mikoto was certainly Academy City's strongest in the category of Electromaster.

Plasma was created from the atoms separating into cations and electrons, so she may have been able to return the plasma to the original atoms by putting the electrons back together with the cations.

But how would that help?

Even if she did manage to return the plasma to its original state, Accelerator would just gather the wind again to recreate the plasma. To seal Accelerator's attack, electricity did not cut it. One needed the ability to control wind like he could. But Mikoto could not control wind with her electricity techniques. Mikoto gritted her teeth at the uselessness of her power in that situation.

She realized the simple fact that Accelerator could be stopped as long as the wind could be manipulated.

"Ah."

Mikoto's mouth fell open stupidly.

The wind turbines were spinning making a sound like the laughter of skulls.

Accelerator was making that plasma by compressing the wind he gathered from throughout the city. The scale was much too small for him to be gathering it from throughout the world, so his ability must have had limits.

For example, when he was controlling rather than just reflecting, he might have to calculate out the original vector for the wind as well as the altered vector.

In that case, his calculations could be interrupted by something causing a disturbance in the wind throughout the city.

Academy City had wind turbines spread throughout the city. There were probably more than ten thousand of them.

And the wind turbines could be made to spin by using a certain electromagnetic wave.

Each individual propeller could only produce a small amount of wind, but more than ten thousand of them spinning at once was a different story. Accelerator may lose control of the wind as a result.

But it would mean nothing if a Level 5 like Mikoto manipulated the turbines.

If Mikoto directly interfered in the battle, the experiment would not end.

If she were to maintain the condition of her own power not interfering, then it was a job that the one and only Misaka Imouto could do.

The level of power between Misaka Imouto and Mikoto was too different. Misaka Imouto's Radio Noise power was a deteriorated version of Mikoto's and it was only Level 2 at best. She could not make very many turbines move.

But there were ten thousand Sisters within the city.

And unlike Accelerator who was calculating the flow of the wind in just his own brain, the ten thousand Sisters had their brain waves linked, so they could predict the flow of the wind using parallel calculations. It was just like how Tree Diagram used high performance parallel processors.

Mikoto ran over to Misaka Imouto who was still lying atop the gravel.

Misaka Imouto's entire body was battered and she did not seem to possess even the strength to stand up on her own legs. Mikoto did not like having to ask this of the girl when she was already in that state, but she had no choice.

"Please, wake up. I know how ridiculous and terrible it is for me to ask this of you, but please wake up!"

She had no choice but to ask.

"There's something I want you to do. No, there's something that only you can do!"

It was necessary for everyone to go home with a smile and without having lost anyone or anything.

“Just this once, please listen to what I have to say! I cannot protect everyone. No matter how much I struggle, I just can’t do it! So I beg you!”

It was necessary to reach that happiest end that everyone wanted and where everyone was smiling.

“Please protect his dream with your power!”

♦

Misaka Imouto heard the Original’s cry within her intermittent consciousness.

She indeed thought it was a ridiculous request. She did not know the situation, so she assumed it would be better for the Original, the stronger esper, to use her power rather than cracking the whip and forcing Misaka Imouto to do it even as her heart was on the verge of stopping.

But she did not complain.

The Original’s words were as unreasonable as they were violent, but for some reason, Misaka Imouto saw her as a small child crying and asking for help.

“…”

Misaka Imouto saw no value in her own life.

Her body could be created at the press of a button and her empty heart had been given to her according to a program. She truly believed that a life worth 180,000 yen could simply be replaced if it died.

But she did not want to die.

While her own life had no value, she now knew there were people who would be sad if they lost the tiny existence that she was, so she could no longer die.

And if that tiny existence could save that crying girl, then she felt that was a wonderful thing.

She had something she had to do.

She had found something she had to protect.

“There’s something I want you to do. No, there’s something that only you can do!”

(Misaka cannot understand the meaning of your words...)

Misaka Imouto slowly gathered strength in her limbs.

(...but those words have left an impression on her for some reason, thinks Misaka expressing her frank feelings.)

Because there was someone who was saying those things, Misaka Imouto was able to stand up once more.

Part 8

With a roar of wind, the sphere of plasma floating above lost its form.

“Wha-...?”

Accelerator looked up. That plasma had been created from all the wind flowing through the city being condensed into one point. The flow of that wind had clearly shaken for an instant. That had caused an error in the compression ratio which caused the plasma to be shaken as well.

Accelerator thought he might have made an error in his calculations of the wind, so he rebuilt those new equations. Unlike simple reflection, he had to calculate both, the vector before alteration and the vector after alteration which was a pain in the ass.

But Accelerator managed to perfectly revise that huge set of equations in less than ten seconds. His brain had developed to the point that something of that level was no problem. In Academy City, power development was part of the teaching method, so Academy City’s strongest espers were also Academy City’s greatest honor students.

But the movement of the wind flowing through the city suddenly changed as if escaping from the supposedly perfect equations he had built up in his head. It was not a mere coincidence. It was as if the wind itself had a will and was slipping through the gaps of his equations.

The mass of compressed air above his head scattered and the plasma disappeared as if it were dissolving into the air.

(What? What the fuck happened!? There was no mistake in my equations. Those irregular eel-like movements were clearly not natural movements of the air!)

He wondered if he had gotten really unlucky and an actual wind user was using his power somewhere in the city, but that did not make sense as the irregular flow of the wind covered the entire city. If there was a wind user with the processing power needed to outdo Accelerator's ability and equations, that person would definitely be designated a Level 5. However, no one like that existed in the seven Level 5s Accelerator knew of.

Accelerator started panicking wondering what had happened, but then he heard a dry clattering sound.

It was the sound of a wind turbine spinning.

(Wait. I've heard that those power generator motors can be made to spin with microwaves!)

Accelerator turned around toward the Sister he thought he had defeated, but he did not find a dying girl there.

What he found there was his enemy.

He found an enemy standing on her legs that seemed about to collapse, not raising a single complaint about the intense pain running across her entire body, and silently glaring at him.

(Damn you...!)

Accelerator's red eyes changed to a deadly crimson.

Even if his control of the plasma and the wind had been stolen, a Sister could not stand up to Accelerator. That right hand was the sole thing in the world that could penetrate his perfect defenses.

"I'll kill you!"

A smile split across his face as he took a step toward the Sister.

Misaka Mikoto cut in between the two of them.

"...Do you really think I'll let you?"

Mikoto's voice sounded tiny amid the raging wind, but for some reason her quiet voice seemed to pierce into Accelerator's eardrums.

"Hah. Don't get carried away. At your lower rank, you can't reach me. You can't even slow me down. It's like with vision tests where they only test up to 2.0. The only reason I'm stuck at the same level as you is because Academy City's levels don't go higher than 5."

Mikoto did not respond. She likely understood that fact better than anyone and she stood there because she did not want to run away despite understanding that.

Accelerator would see her as in the way and decide to kill her first.

Suddenly, a noise came from behind Accelerator.

"..."

Accelerator timidly turned around.

An unbelievable sight spread out before his eyes there. The boy who had been blown away by 120 m/s winds and slammed into the pole of a wind turbine was slowly standing up.

The boy had countless injuries and it looked like blood was spurting out whenever he put even a slight amount of strength into a muscle. He had almost no strength left, his legs were trembling, and his arms were hanging down like the branches of a willow tree.

Even so, the boy did not collapse.

He would certainly not collapse.

".....!"

Accelerator's throat grew as dry as a desert.

Normally, one would think that boy could no longer fight. Someone with that much damage would be destroyed by Accelerator in a single strike.

Even if Accelerator did not want to directly fight the boy, he could always just kill Mikoto and the Sister so he could regain his control over the wind and the plasma. Accelerator was standing much closer to the girls than the boy was.

His reason told him that he could easily win if he dealt with everything calmly.

But something beyond that told him it was incredibly dangerous to turn his back on that boy.

Danger signals were fired from every part of his body.

A normal person would have been able to understand those signals as fear of pain.

"You're amazing!"

Accelerator clenched his fist.

“You’re really fucking amazing!”

Kamijou moved his battered body to take a step forward.

With just that slight movement, it felt like all of his blood was evaporating. It felt like just thinking slightly would blow his consciousness away.

Even so, Kamijou continued forward.

With his dim consciousness, Kamijou did not completely understand the situation. He did not know why that wind had blown, he did not know why the plasma had disappeared, and he did not know why he had survived. Even his mind was so battered that those important things had been knocked from his awareness.

Even so, he saw the situation before him.

He saw Accelerator about to kill Misaka Imouto.

He saw Mikoto standing between them to act as a shield for Misaka Imouto.

That was enough.

That was more than enough reason for him to stand up.

“You’re amazing!”

He heard Accelerator’s voice.

“You’re really fucking amazing!”

As Accelerator howled up at the night sky, he ran forward clenching his fist in order to crush Kamijou Touma. He did the same alteration of the vectors of the force of his foot as he kicked the ground as before so that he flew forward like a bullet. Kamijou was thankful. If his opponent was coming for him, he didn’t have to walk any further. With Kamijou’s battered body, he would likely collapse before making it to Accelerator.

Kamijou Touma had no power.

He did not even have the slight bit of strength left needed to walk on his own two feet, to form words with his own tongue, or to think with his own mind.

Even so, Kamijou clenched his right fist.

He clenched it.

He looked up.

Accelerator had almost reached him as he shot forward like a bullet.

The right hand of suffering and the left hand of poison.

Both of Accelerator's hand could kill with just a touch and they were headed for Kamijou's face.

For an instant, time stopped.

Kamijou mustered up every last ounce of strength remaining in his body and sank down as if he were swinging his head down. The right hand of suffering fruitlessly passed above his head and the left hand of poison was knocked aside by Kamijou's right hand.

"Grit your teeth, you weak strongest!" Kamijou said to Accelerator whose heart had frozen at having his doubly surefire attack suppressed.

Kamijou gave a ferocious, beast-like smile while they were at such extreme close range that they were almost touching.

"Have a taste of the strength of the weakest!"

An instant later, Kamijou Touma's right fist plowed into Accelerator's face.

His slender white body ways forcefully knocked to the gravel-covered ground where he rolled around with his arms and legs roughly strewn about.

EPILOGUE

Only One.

ID_Not_Found.

When Kamijou awoke, he was in a dark hospital room.

Perhaps due to anesthesia, he felt an odd feeling in the area of his lips. He moved only his eyes to look around. He was in a standard private room and it seemed to be the middle of the night. Only the sound of the air conditioner could be heard in the silent hospital room. From the fact that a change of clothes or fruits from visitors were not lying around, it seemed it had not been long since he had been brought to the hospital. The only other things in the room were a chair next to the bed and Misaka Imouto who sat within the chair.

"What!?"

Kamijou tried to jump up without thinking, but his anesthetized body did not move.

Misaka Imouto had bandages wrapped around her body in places. He also heard the mewing of the black cat. Kamijou couldn't see it from his location, but it must have been curled up beneath the bed.

Also, Misaka Imouto had her hands wrapped around Kamijou's hand.

It really didn't matter, but Misaka Imouto had drawn her hands up to her chest, so Kamijou's hand had been brought to the border of touching a certain bulge.

"M-M-M-M-M-Misaka-san? Wait, this is odd. Why is such a happy event occurring? I don't remember activating any flags in this direction!"

Kamijou's shout must have surprised the black cat beneath the bed because it let out a frightened mew.

"...Your conversations are as incoherent as ever, but just so you know, you were the one who grabbed Misaka's hand, says Misaka using the modern kana usage to make herself easier to understand."

“No way! I refuse to believe that I’m so desperate that my hand moved to a girl’s chest while I was under general anesthesia!”

Kamijou of course wanted to yell and hold his head in his hands, but his body would not move.

Misaka Imouto stared questioningly at Kamijou’s crazed behavior with her expressionless eyes.

“All you did was grab Misaka’s hand, says Misaka in a supplementary explanation. It was Misaka who brought your hand to this position, so that was not your fault, responds Misaka.”

“...Princess, why would you do something such as that?”

“Misaka was merely measuring your brainwaves and heart rate from the flow of your bodily electricity, responds Misaka immediately. There was no sexual meaning to it.”

“Se-!?”

Kamijou thought his breathing was going to stop when he suddenly realized something.

(Huh? Does that mean I’m touching it? My hand is touching it? But I can’t feel anything because of the anesthesia! Ahh, dammit! I can’t move even a finger! God damn iiiiiiiiitttttt!)

“D-dammit...What misfortune...!!”

“Misaka does not see any irregularity in your speech center, says Misaka expressing a matter of worry.”

Misaka Imouto was as expressionless as ever.

The black cat mewed sleepily from beneath the bed.

Kamijou gave up on his pointless efforts and looked back at Misaka Imouto’s face.

“Well, at least we both managed to return home after that.”

Kamijou had said that lightly, but he truly meant it. He had to mean it because what would he have been risking his life fighting for otherwise?

“About that, replies Misaka.” Misaka Imouto was petting the cat. “Misaka still cannot return to the same world as you, says Misaka honestly.”

Kamijou’s body started to tremble. Was that experiment still continuing?

“No, it is not that. The experiment seems to be headed to its end since Accelerator’s defeat, thoroughly reports Misaka.” Misaka Imouto fell silent for an instant. “The problem for Misaka is her own body, explains Misaka.”

“Your body?”

“Yes. Misaka’s body is a clone body created from the Original’s cells and it was rapidly grown with the use of various chemicals, explains Misaka. Cellular clones have shorter life spans to begin with and that rapid growth only made it shorter, says Misaka hoping you will understand.”

“…”

Kamijou was left speechless.

That was just too much. They had all finally worked together to free her from that hell and now they could not be together no matter what they chose because of the girl’s short lifespan.

The girl had fought without complaining even once, but in the end, she had nothing left no matter how hard she struggled.

“So it is necessary for Misaka to temporarily stay in a research facility in order to be adjusted...Are you listening? asks Misaka as she glares at you.”

“Hah? Adjusted?”

“Yes. By adjusting the hormone balance that brought on the accelerated growth and by adjusting the nucleus division rate, Misaka’s life span can be recovered to a certain extent, replies Misaka. ...Hello? By any chance, did you just assume the story was over here? questions Misaka.”

“Will this adjustment thing heal you?”

“...You seem to be implying that Misaka would not be healed, says Misaka in a displeased manner.”

The cat below the bed mewed.

“Misaka will be going.”

Misaka Imouto picked up the slightly frightened black cat and headed for the door.

“Ah, wait. You’re going already?”

“Do not worry.” Misaka Imouto did not turn back around. “You will see Misaka soon, announces Misaka.”

“I see,” said Kamijou as he closed his eyes.

That was fine. If they made any kind of special promise, it would give him the feeling he would never see her again. Instead, he was just going to see her soon and he truly believed that. That more casual parting was much better.

The story was not over.

There was enough still to come that he would remember that day as being nothing special.

In the darkness of his closed eyes, he heard the sound of the door closing.

He was then assaulted by a drug-induced sleepiness.

Even so, Kamijou smiled as he dreamed of the time he would see her again.

♦

The next time he opened his eyes, day had come.

“Oh, are you awake?”

Misaka Mikoto had said that. Her face was thickly covered with weariness, but she still smiled.

“Here, I brought you some cookies. I chose some pretty expensive ones from the basement of a department store, so they might be kind of good. Tell me what you thought of them later. If they aren’t any good, I’ll never go back to that store.”

“Mh. If you’re gonna go with cookies, homemade is best.”

“...What kind of character do you think I am?”

“No, no. I’m talking about having a clumsy character clumsily doing her best to make some misshapen cookies. Well, you probably just don’t understand.”

“Again: what kind of character do you think I am!?”

Time passed as Kamijou and Mikoto argued back and forth. It made Kamijou happy to be able to spend that usual time while being in that usual world.

“Oh, right. Misaka Imouto came by last night.”

Kamijou told Mikoto what had happened the night before. He told her that Misaka Imouto was staying at another research institution to heal her body and that she had promised to come back to Kamijou someday.

“I see.”

That was all Mikoto said.

Her eyes narrowed as if she was watching over something precious to her, but there were some shadows floating in her eyes.

Mikoto had managed to stop the experiment.

And she had managed to save the lives of almost ten thousand Sisters.

But she had not managed to save the lives of the other Sisters.

Due to the DNA map she had carelessly shared, twenty thousand Sisters had been born solely to be killed. That truth would weigh on her back for the rest of her life. Even if no one else blamed her for it and everyone in the world forgave her for it, she would still carry that around with her for the rest of her life.

“But,” Kamijou muttered and Mikoto silently looked over at him.

Her eyes were like those of a child left alone in a strange city, but Kamijou was not looking at them.

“If you hadn’t shared your DNA map, the Sisters would never have been born in the first place. There may have been a lot wrong with that experiment, but I think the birth of the Sisters is something you should be proud of.”

Mikoto remained silent for a bit.

Finally, she poke in a voice that sounded like a child who was about to cry.

“...Even though over ten thousand Sisters were killed due to me?”

“Even so,” Kamijou responded.

Saying painful things were painful and that difficult things were difficult was something that anyone could do, but they could not do them if they had never been born.

“I’m sure the Sisters do not resent you. There were a lot of twisted aspects to that experiment, but I’m sure they’re thankful that they were born.”

Mikoto’s breath caught in her throat.

Seeing her face, a small smile appeared on Kamijou’s anesthetized face.

“So it’s okay for you to smile. The Sisters don’t want you alone to be down like this. The Sisters you wanted to protect are not so small-minded that they would be satisfied with having their pain forced onto someone else, right?”

♦

When he awoke again, it was three o’clock. That was the time for snacks.

However, Kamijou did not get a chance to eat the cookies he got from Mikoto.

This was because Index was staring at him from extremely close range from atop the bed.

“Touma, don’t you have something to say?”

“.....Um, good morning?”

The instant he made that joke, she bit down on his entire head. His body twitched around on the bed like he was being shot with a stun gun. Index was fully in kill mode and a cry escaped Kamijou’s lips like that of a cat having its tail stepped on.

“Wait! Wait!! My injuries this time aren’t something to joke about! And weren’t you worried at all about your landlord!?”

“I *was* worried!” Index yelled.

Kamijou’s breathe caught in his throat when he heard her yell like a stubborn child.

“...I was worried,” Index said once more.

She stopped biting Kamijou’s head and wrapped her arms around his head like it was a pillow.

Kamijou thought for a bit.

What if their situations had been reversed?

What if Index had been doing such absurd things without him knowing and she had ended up in the hospital? How much would he blame himself for remaining peacefully carefree without her discussing any of it with him?

“I’m sorry,” Kamijou said.

“It’s fine,” Index said as she let go of his head and smiled.

There was a definite difference between Kamijou and Index.

She was the kind of person who did not simply get angry. She was also able to smile.

“And Touma, once again, once again, once again, you kept the problem all to yourself. If you don’t discuss these things with me, I’m gonna have to give you a serious lecture.”

“Ah ha ha,” laughed Kamijou so he did not have to give an actual response.

He had to hide the fact that he had lost his memories.

“Hoo. Well, discussing it any more won’t help anything. So what were you fighting for, Touma?”

“Hm?” Kamijou said to check what Index had said before responding. “For myself.”

♦

And so, his usual everyday life began again on that day.

Kamijou Touma walked down the usual path without turning back to the past.

If the dream of the future he had dreamt involving Misaka Imouto ended up actually happening, that was great. And if it didn’t, that was fine, too.

All that mattered was that the future was so happy for Misaka Imouto that it surprised her.

AFTERWORD

To those who have been buying each book from Volume 1: welcome back.

To those who took this chance to buy all three books: welcome and thank you very much.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

...Yes, this book is called A Certain *Magical Index*. Those of you who have finished reading can have a nice laugh now. I'm sure you're wondering what is with this magnificent (and pointless) trick. Those of you who started by reading the afterword just need to read the actual book. That will answer your questions.

But before you throw the book at the wall, let me make some excuses. There are a few parts of this book that touch on magic. Of course, one of those is the scene with Index in it, but there are actually other sections that give explanations regarding magical systems.

I guess you could say the theme this time was the technique of everyday magic where there is magic but is never referred to with the word "magic". This technique is primarily used in fairy tales and the like, but I tried using it this time. As the author, I would like it if you have all your friends read the book and then have discussions over where the magic talk was hidden.

To be honest, I'm a "rule junky" that loves these kinds of hidden rules that have nothing to do with the main topic but still exist to the side.

A real life example is the decoding of ISBN codes.

There should be the letters ISBN followed by a number on the back of this book. Most people know that the number refers to the name of the book, but I don't think very many people think seriously about what the number means.

If you go look, A Certain Magical Index (1) is 4-8402-2658-X. With just that, you can't figure anything out, but let's compare it to another book. Suzuki Suzu-sensei's Umibe no Usagi is *4-8402-26*31-8. Oh. The 4-8402-26 is the same. And Minase Hazuki-sensei's Kekkaishi no Fugue that debuted the same month as my series is 4-8402-26*5*9-8. It is only one number off from my 4-8402-2658-X.

In that case, you might think the 4-8402-26 refers to Dengeki Bunko and the numbers afterwards are the order of release. However, Hayama Tooru-sensei's 9S (1) is 4-8402-*24*61-7. Oh? The previous assumption would say that should have been 26.

If we look further, we find that Takahata Kyouichirou-sensei's HHO (01-03) is 4-8402-*24*14-5. That's 24 again. Those two books with 24 were released in 2003 and the others with 26 were released in 2004. In that case, those two digits seem to indicate the year.

The fact that it moved from 24 to 26 in one year is most likely because the next 2 digits refers to the number of titles released in that year. Dengeki Bunko releases about 10 books a month, so they release 100-200 titles a year. I'm guessing the number jumped from 24 to 26 because 25 was used as a cushion for when the number of released titles reached three digits.

I've written this all out fairly confidently, but that's probably not the correct answer. In fact, it's highly likely that I've made a major mistake. But that's fine because I'm in this to enjoy imagining different rules rather than to find the correct answer.

If you read all this and got interested enough to look at the back cover, then I suggest you look into the number known as the JAN code. It seems that is hiding a certain set of rules behind it too, so it would be perfect to kill some time.

Now a rule that currently has my interest is the spines of Dengeki Bunko books. It seems they are color coded by author, but what is the rule behind the color coding?

1. It is a definite choice based on color psychology.

2. The colors are simply put in rotation based on the order the authors make their debuts.

3. It is based on the whim of the editors.

When I thought about it, I ended up choosing number 2, but what do you all think?

I give my great thanks to my editor Miki-san and my illustrator Haimura Kiyotaka-san. It is definitely those two who gave color to this book that is so full of holes it's like a bee hive. On my own, I'm like a small bird without any wings, so I hope we can continue to get along.

And I give my greatest thanks to you who have picked up this book. It is most certainly due to you that I stand here now.

I now pray that this book will always stay in a corner of your bookshelf.

I also hope that it remains in your precious memories.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Twenty thousand Sisters...Did I end up breaking a record for the most new characters?

-Kamachi Kazuma